



# JEEVADHARA

## INDIAN CONSUMERISM

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Felix Wilfred

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

## Indian Consumerism

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## **Editorial**

"You are what you buy" is to express cryptically the enormous influence consumerism has on the life of the people today. India is not lagging behind in consumerism. The world too looks at India as a huge market for consumer goods and services. If the period immediately following Independence was still characterized by the traditional values of simplicity frugality and austerity – with the ideals of Gandhi still high on the horizon – the period subsequent to liberalization in the 1990's has witnessed increasing consumerist trends in India, first among the middle class and progressively expanding to all classes of people without distinction. A set of new values and attitudes has crept in with the practice of consumerism. It is no more a matter of consuming things for their utility value, but more and more for the symbolic value they have and the recognition and identity they bring to people in society. No wonder that markets are flooded with goods and the use-and-throw culture ensures that they are fast replaced with new ones.

The phenomenon of consumerism could be studied from various angles. The contribution in this number of *Jeevadhara* explores some select aspects. The issue begins with economy – the linchpin of consumerism. V. S. Sambandan sees a connection between the growth in consumerism and the progressive withdrawal of the state from providing basic needs such as education and healthcare to people, leaving these to private players. Analyzing the views of thinkers as different as Karl Marx, Adam Smith, Bertrand Russel and Pope John Paul II, he concludes how consumerist trends could be stemmed with state playing a more active and efficient role in allocating resources. Paul Appasamy analyzing closely the Indian scenario, points out how liberalization and growth in IT sector has contributed to enormous increase in income and to extravagant spending. He also points out how consumerism creates inequality and serious ecological problem, and even collapse of banking system, if un-regulated.

Veena Easvaradoss, on her part, analyzes the psychosocial correlates of consumerism with reference to numerous researches already done.

She notes how there is a negative correlation between consumerism and wellbeing. Basing on several researches, she concludes involvement in community and transcendental pursuits could psychologically respond to the mood of and inclination to consumerism. N. Manohar studies the phenomenon from legal perspective, and explores the means and measures already in place to protect the consumers from exploitation and safeguard their rights. James Ponniah shows how religion is more and more influenced by consumerist trends and consumerism and market, on their part, opt for religious language and imageries to suit their purpose. This is most visible in popular religiosity and in New Age movements. Finally, in my article, I try to analyze some of the less studied aspects of consumerism and highlight its sign or symbolic aspect. Traditional ethics may not be the remedy to cure the ills and consequences of consumerism. The article brings out the importance of looking for other sources such as the potential of cultures, ecological movements, involvement in centrifugal practices which all could help transform and fashion the self, liberating it from craving for consumption.

The contributions are a selection from a National Conference on Indian Consumerism, organized by Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, Chennai, during 9 -10, October, 2016. I thank the contributors for their generosity, especially for re-working their papers for publication in *Jeevadhara*, in spite of their busy schedule. I thank Vincent Mary, the managing secretary of the Centre, for having so efficiently and dedicatedly organized the conference with participation of numerous scholars across the country. But for her organizational abilities and planning, the conference would not have taken place. As in the past, Nirmal stood by me in checking the articles and editing every line of this issue with singular dedication and with her exceptional concentration. I thank her warmly.

The editor of this issue will feel highly rewarded if the analyses and reflections set out here would help scholars to probe further the question of consumerism from their disciplinary perspectives, and help those at the grassroots to find innovative ways to respond to consumerism upholding social equality and sustainability of nature.

**Felix Wilfred**

Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies

Chennai, Festival of Pongal 15 January, 2016

# **The Unhappiness of Adam Smith, Karl Marx and India's Consumers**

**V.S. Sambandan**

The author is chief administrative officer at The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, Chennai. Indian consumerism is fuelled by the withdrawal of governments from providing life-defining services such as education and healthcare. This article contextualises the economic role of governments from classical economic thought and ethical perspectives. Highlighting the divergence of state and individual economic behaviour from core values held by Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Bertrand Russell and Pope John Paul II, it calls for efficient allocation of private and public resources to curb consumerism.

If there is one activity that binds all of us, it is that we are all consumers. I address the issue by drawing upon key formulations by renowned economists, thinkers and leaders, to place consumerism in context and to suggest a way forward.

The first building block is the role of consumption as an economic activity. That all of us are economic agents is rather well established. Two essential attributes of modern economic analysis, as we describe it now, will continue to exist. These are production and consumption. These are inherent to Economics, as defined elaborately by Lionel Robbins, but which is studied in only an abridged form by generations of students. An elaborate version of the famous 'scarcity' definition is:

The economist studies the disposal of scarce means. He is interested in the way different degrees of scarcity of different goods give rise to different ratios of valuation between them, and he is interested in the way in which changes in conditions of scarcity, whether coming from changes in ends or changes in

means - from the demand side or the supply side - affect these ratios. Economics is the science which studies human behaviour as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses<sup>1</sup>

This basic building block, "scarcity", can be real or perceived; naturally occurring or artificially constructed; and finite or transient. In most cases of consumerism, it is the second three of the above pairs that are at play – perceived, artificially constructed, and transient.

### **Adam Smith on consumption and equity**

A reading of Smith's views on consumption makes it evident that consumerism goes against the grain of Smith's analysis of economics.

Though it is popularly known that Smith asserted that "[c]onsumption is the sole end and purpose of all production," this is not the complete truth. In half-truth lies enormous danger and half-truths have been built destructive myths.

When we think of Smith, we think of the butcher and the baker and how they go about doing their tasks, not, we are told, in the interest of the community, but out of self-interest. This half-truth leads to an ethical problem, which is both untrue of Smith and has resulted in justifying much of the rising consumerism: the phenomenon of commodities being created, and marketers then going about enticing consumers to enter the tangled web of consumerism.

Smith places the interest of the consumer, not the producer, at the core of economic activity. That he would be extremely annoyed, and find the present form of capitalism unworthy of acclaim is well reflected from the full quotation of his oft cited "consumption is the sole end of production" half-truth. In the seminal book, *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith is critical of economic dynamics that conflicts consumer's interest:

Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to only so far

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<sup>1</sup>Robbins, L., 1932. *An Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science*. London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd.

as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it. But in the mercantile system the interest of the consumer is almost constantly sacrificed to that of the producer; and it seems to consider production, and not consumption, as the ultimate end and object of all industry and commerce.<sup>2</sup>

What Smith wrote in the last quarter of the Mercantile 18<sup>th</sup> century increasingly relevant today, given the political and economic changes India and internationally since the 1990s.

To understand Smith's treatise, it is important to recognise where nith comes from as a professional and as a scholar. His treatise, *The Wealth of Nations*, unfortunately has been, as Alan Kreuger of inceton University, puts it, "selectively cited" not only in the concept 'invisible hands' but also, on the roles played by consumption in economics, the consumer in the economic system, and the role of the ate in shaping economic activity.

Smith was Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Glasgow, hen he authored *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*<sup>3</sup>, a work that he robably considered his "most important and influential work".<sup>4</sup> The link between *Moral Sentiments* and *Wealth of Nations* is brought out well by Macfie (1959), who points out that the critical link is Smith's iew of what we now call equity<sup>5</sup>.

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Smith, A., 1776. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd. (Ed. Alan B. Krueger, 2003, Bantam Dell, New York, pp 839.) Available online at <http://www.econlib.org/library/mith/smWN18.html#B.IV, Ch.8, Conclusion of the Mercantile System> Accessed: 30 September, 2015)

Smith, A., 1759. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. First ed. London: s.n. available online at [http://www.ibiblio.org/ml/libri/s/Smith A \\_ Moral sentiments\\_p.pdf](http://www.ibiblio.org/ml/libri/s/Smith A _ Moral sentiments_p.pdf) (Accessed: September 25, 2015)

Smith, A., *Op. Cit.* pp. xxii

Macfie, A. L., 1959 (Oct). Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments as Foundation for His Wealth of Nations. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 11(3), pp. 209-228.

For Smith, the moral philosopher and the father of Economics, two concepts, ‘self-love’ in *Moral Sentiments* and ‘self-interest’ in *The Wealth of Nations*, and ‘equity’ in both masterpieces reflect his concern for society, disdain for unfairness, and an assertion of individual rights that should not be held hostage to either market forces or state power. When discussing ‘equity’ Smith has this to say in *Moral Sentiments*:

If any man, therefore, was so absurdly constituted as to approve of cruelty and injustice as the highest values, and to disapprove of equity and humanity as the pitiful vices, such a constitution of mind might indeed be regarded as inconvenient both to the individual and to the society, and likewise as strange, surprising and unnatural in itself, but it could not, without the greatest absurdity, be denominated vicious or morally evil.<sup>6</sup>

The lack of a sense of equity is both “inconvenient” to individuals and society, and “morally evil” in *Moral Sentiments*. As an extension of this to Economics, in *Wealth of Nations*, economic equity is central to Smith’s formulation of a “flourishing” and “happy” society, and the allocation of wages.

No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably fed, cloathed and lodged.<sup>7</sup>[sic]

It is evident that Smith’s prescriptions are disregarded. Reducing Smith to a ‘messiah of the free market’ and invoking him to rationalise its ailments in the name of the ‘invisible hand’ and ‘market forces’, the biggest injustice rendered to this great classical moral philosopher and economist.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, A., (1759) *Op. Cit.* pp. 295

<sup>7</sup>Smith, A., (1776) *Op. Cit.* pp. 110-111

## Smith and Marx

Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was a critique of Mercantilism and hence it specifies the role for governments. We should also notice Smith's conceptualisation of an ideal government. Book IV of *Wealth of Nations* begins as follows:

Political Economy, considered as a branch of the science of a statesman or legislator, proposes two distinct objects: first, to provide plentiful revenue or subsistence for the people, or more properly to enable them to provide such a revenue or subsistence for themselves; and secondly, to supply the state or commonwealth with a revenue sufficient for the public services. It proposes to enrich both the people and the sovereign.<sup>8</sup>

Evidently, Smith was not asking the government to shut itself down and restrict itself to the role of a soldier and a policeman, leaving all else to the benevolence of the market forces, as present day proponents of the free market wish. Nor did he propose that governments become midwives of companies in their continuous pursuit for profits at all costs, and in all sectors.

Smith saw the government as one that had a role in providing education, especially at the early level, where it should be both rewarded and made compulsory, to give all children a sound grounding to start their livelihoods. He gave children their rightful place in school, by prescribing that:

The public can impose upon almost the whole body of the people the **necessity** of acquiring those most essential parts of education, by **obliging** every man to undergo an examination or probation in them before he can obtain the freedom in any corporation, or be allowed to set up trade either in a village or town corporate.<sup>9</sup>  
[All emphases added]

Injustice fell not only on this first of classical economists, but also on the last of them, Karl Marx, philosopher, scholar, journalist, whose

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 537

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 991

doctrine is seen as the polar opposite of that of Smith. However, there are concepts that bind Smith and Marx.

The first is their quest for an equitable society. Though both differed in the approach to reach this, they expressed outrage against inequity. I restrict my observations to their call for public investments in the development of the critical attribute of human development and economic empowerment of the individual – education.

Secondly, both saw in commodities – and the manufacturing process - the alienation of the individual. For Smith the alienation process was a direct result of division of labour, which he, no doubt, welcomes as a productivity enhancing mechanism. However, the moral philosopher in Smith decades before writing *Wealth of Nations* made the important observation in his *Lectures on Justice, Police Revenue and Arms*<sup>10</sup> that one of the “inconveniences” of “a commercial spirit” and indeed, division of labour, is the death of creativity among workers. Smith, in this early lecture, makes the point, tellingly:

These are the disadvantages of a commercial spirit. The minds of men are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation. Education is despised, or at least neglected, and heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished. To remedy these defects would be an object worthy of serious attention.<sup>11</sup>

In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith places alienation in the discussion concerning state and education, thereby according to the state an important role in correcting this malaise among the workforce. What binds Smith and Marx in their approach to analysing political economy is that Smith anticipated “all three types of alienation – self-estrangement, isolation, and powerlessness – identified by Marx”<sup>12</sup>. Lamb’s paper, which establishes this similarity, makes it convenient for us to move directly to Marx’s views on consumerism, reflected in his writings on Commodity Fetishism.

<sup>10</sup> Lamb, R., 1973. Adam Smith’s Concept of Alienation. *Oxford Economic Papers, New Series*, July, 25(3), pp. 275-285.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

Marx and Smith approached the production, consumption and exchange process from the value perspective. Moreover, they shared an underlying ethical theme – that of equity.

### The Vatican and Bertrand Russell

It would be appropriate to see what a commodity is, its role in economics, and in society. Arjun Appadurai in an excellent introductory essay<sup>13</sup> distinguishes the various strands of commodities – particularly the economic and the sociological attributes of commodities. One particular distinction that he points out – between primary and luxury commodities – is of direct relevance.

The ethical dimension of consumerism is derived from the sense of inequity that arises from the lack of redistributive justice. With the caveat that ethics is independent of religion, religious beliefs or the lack thereof, I will highlight the tendency of a commodity-driven society falling prey to the pursuit of money.

I will restrict myself to two schools of thought – one by the agnostic philosopher, Bertrand Russell, and the other by the Vatican – but both make the same point: that the worship of money is not desirable and results in damaging individuals and societies.

Russell makes a fine distinction between primary and secondary “politically important desires”. The former group will include the necessities of life: food, shelter and clothing. *When these things become scarce, there is no limit to the efforts that men will make, or to the violence that they will display, in the hope of securing them.* Drawing instances from early history, Russell concludes his ‘necessities’ argument by observing rather non-judgementally that, *Undoubtedly the desire for food has been, and still is, one of the main causes of treat political events.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Appadurai, A., n.d. Introduction: commodities and the politics of value, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Ed. Appadurai A). Available online at [http://townsendgroups.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/appadurai\\_social\\_life\\_of\\_things\\_0.pdf](http://townsendgroups.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/appadurai_social_life_of_things_0.pdf) Accessed: Oct 7, 2015]

<sup>14</sup> Russell, B., 2013. Politically Important Desires. In: R. E. Egner & L. E. Denonn, eds. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Noida: Routledge, p. 447.

From this rather amoral position, Russell moves to firmer ground when he deals with “acquisitiveness”, which he describes as “the wish to possess as much as possible of goods or to the title of goods.” The motive for this, Russell points out, is “a combination of fear with the desire for necessities.”<sup>15</sup>

He would do this by sacrificing leisure for labour in the hope of earning more wages and thereby acquiring more goods that are not “primary” in nature. This, inevitably, will result in what Russell terms “the worship of money.” Russell’s reference to the economic dynamics that was played out in 1916 is apt and worth recalling, if not for anything else, to point out the debilitating effect of consumerism on Indian society.

One of the least-questioned assumptions of the capitalist system is that production ought to be increased in amount by every possible means: buy new kinds of machinery, by employment of women and boys, by making hours of labour as long as is compatible with efficiency...

The belief in the importance of production has a fanatical irrationality and ruthlessness. ... Our whole economic system encourages this view, since fear of unemployment makes any kind of work a boon to wage-earners. The mania for increasing production has turned men’s thoughts away from much more important problems, and has prevented the world from getting the benefits it might have got out of the increased productivity of labour.<sup>16</sup>

Pointing out that “when we are fed and clothed and housed, further material goods are needed only for ostentation”, Russell adds that the continuous pursuit of acquiring more goods push people to work longer, sacrificing time that could have been spent with family, “partly in better education”, and create a society in which:

There is far more science and art, more diffused knowledge and mental cultivation, more leisure for wage-earners, and more

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 448

<sup>16</sup>Russell, B., 2013. Politically Important Desires. In: R. E. Egner & L. E. Denoneds. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Noida: Routledge, p. 447.

capacity for intelligent pleasures. At present not only wages, but all earned incomes, can only be obtained by working much longer hours than men ought to work.

This extract from Russell places the ethical framework quite well. In sum, not only is the pursuit of acquisition driven by "fear" but it also results in the "worship of money" at the cost of values that improve the individual and society.

The Vatican has also made its position on consumerism quite evident, giving another but related and converging standpoint, though ideologically opposite from that of Russell. I recall here an Encyclical by Pope John Paul II.

On May Day of 1991, Pope John Paul II made a strong plea against consumerism through his Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII. Both Encyclicals aim to derive a framework and an understanding of the role of economics in society and, importantly, the role of a state:

It would now be helpful to direct our attention to the specific problems and threats emerging within the more advanced economies and which are related to their particular characteristics. In earlier stages of development, man always lived under the weight of necessity. His needs were few and were determined, to a degree, by the objective structures of his physical make-up. Economic activity was directed towards satisfying these needs. It is clear that today the problem is not only one of supplying people with a sufficient quantity of goods, but also of responding to a **demand for quality**: the quality of the goods to be produced and consumed, the quality of the services to be enjoyed, the quality of the environment and of life in general.

... The manner in which new needs arise and are defined is always marked by a more or less appropriate concept of man and of his true good. A given culture reveals its overall understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption. It is here that **the phenomenon of consumerism** arises. In singling out new needs and new means to meet

them, one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of man which respects all the dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones.

... Of itself, an economic system does not possess criteria for correctly distinguishing new and higher forms of satisfying human needs from artificial new needs which hinder the formation of a mature personality. Thus a great deal of educational and cultural work is urgently needed, including the **education of consumers** in the responsible use of their power of choice, the formation of a strong sense of responsibility among producers and among people in the mass media in particular, as well as the necessary intervention by public authorities.<sup>17</sup>

Pope John Paul II's call, at the sunset of the last century has an important message: the role of the state in providing for the wellbeing of its citizens is critical.

### *The Communist Manifesto*

Two other important persons, who authored a classic that led to the creation of the only possible empire to be founded, and lost politically, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expressed disdain over the pursuit of unfettered spread of capital and its debilitating consequences.

Marx and Friedrich Engels, in *The Communist Manifesto* point out a crucial cultural implication that foretells the consequences of consumerism: "The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation."

On the spread of this tendency to what we can now identify and name as the latest, and perhaps most virulent form of globalisation till date, Marx and Engels say:

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, 1991, *Centesimus Annus* 36, Vatican, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html#%241](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html#%241) [Accessed Oct 7, 2015]

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere. ... The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.<sup>18</sup>

The *Manifesto* was a document that reshaped the role of the state in managing the economy. It assigned to the state a task important to our deliberations: taxation and education. Its redefined state had 10 enumerated functions. The second was to put in place “a heavy progressive or graduated income tax” and tenth was “free education for all children in public schools. ...”

### A common disdain

Be it Smith or Marx; Pope John Paul II or Bertrand Russell, from supporters of capitalism to those who saw its inevitable collapse, from the global head of a church to a renowned agnostic philosopher, there is a common disdain against the unchecked pursuit of profit. There is also a strong message that the consumer, not the producer, is at the hub of the economic process, and, finally that the state should play a role in ensuring redistributive justice and directly involve itself in education. Have the developments in India since Independence, particularly over the last 25 years, given any reason for these intellectuals to be happy? The short answer is no.

### Education and Health

The single common cause for the unhappiness of Adam Smith and Karl Marx and the Indian consumer, is the gradual withdrawal of the Indian state from providing its citizens decent education and healthcare. This is a congenital defect of the Indian state. One of the founding errors of the nation was to not make healthcare universal and ensure that education should be both compulsory and state run.

Do we as citizens of this country respect each other the same way? The honest answer is “No. Not universally.” This, in the view of India’s

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<sup>18</sup> Marx, K., and Engels, F., 1888. *The Communist Manifesto* (Translated: Samuel Moore). Penguin Little Black Classics, Penguin Classics, 2015.

noted sociologist, Dipankar Gupta, is because we as a nation have not provided universal access to healthcare and education. The role of the state, in creating an equitable society, is to provide equal access to all in these two critical areas of intervention.<sup>19</sup>

From this original defect, the further withdrawal of the state has resulted in wider inequities, unequal growth, and the proliferation of private education and health care facilities. It is appropriate to remind ourselves here that Indian out of pocket expenditure is on the higher side at 85.9 per cent of private expenditure on health in 2010-2014.

I would like to round off this brief reference by making just two brief points. Both education and healthcare are life-defining activities. They have the potential to increase living standards, equally they have the potential to throw families into poverty. Most importantly, while expenses on healthcare can send families into spirals of poverty, the lack of education has inter-generational consequences. The cost incurred on such activities, which should be provided by the state, is the leading cause for the inequitable society that we live in and contributes to the sadness of the Indian consumer.

### **The way forward**

The way out of this consumerism trap is intervention by the state in the three following areas: a) redistributive justice through taxation, b) free and compulsory access to high quality education, and c) universal and free access to healthcare. For, when the state gives its people a level playing ground to start their lives, then human talent and opportunities that grow with an economy will ensure that the monies earned will be well spent.

In addition, the creation of healthy and affordable good quality public infrastructure such as public transport, parks and libraries will go a long way in reducing wasteful expenditure. At the community level, I

<sup>19</sup> Venkatesh, M. R. & Sambandan, V. S., 2014. *Leadership vacuum feeding India's right-wing politics: Dipankar Gupta*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.thehinducentre.com/the-arena/current-issues/article5617328.ece> [Accessed 08 October 2015]

lvoke an additional role, that of skill development, to encourage future generations to become active and informed economic players in society.

Finally, and importantly at the ideological level, the great classical economist, Smith, needs to be freed from the convenient interpretations that surround his value systems.

Freeing Adam Smith from his ideological captivity by the right and the left would enable a better discussion of how markets and social policies can be fruitfully combined to the benefit of majority of workers; those with incomes below the mean. In my view, it is the political left that holds the key. It should abandon the false proposition that markets and free trade cannot complement social interventions, strong unions and a generous welfare state in an egalitarian development path.<sup>20</sup>

To conclude, I leave you with some words from Karl Marx:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past...<sup>21</sup>

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Moene, K., 2010. The Moral Sentiments of the Wealth of Nations. *Adam Smith Review (Forthcoming)*.

Brown, A., 2010. *The Rise and Fall of Communism*. London: Vintage.

# **The Economic Dimensions of a Consumerist Society**

**Paul P. Appasamy**

The author is professor at Madras School of Economics and former VC of Karunya University, Coimbatore. Economic reforms and opening up of the economy have led to a consumer boom in emerging economies like India. Outsourcing in the IT sector has resulted in substantial wage increases, which are disproportionately spent on consumer goods, creating a consumerist society. Consumerism increases income and wealth inequality; causes ecological problems like pollution and global warming; and possible collapse of the banking sector if left unregulated.

Economics is concerned with the allocation of scarce resources for the production and consumption of goods and services. In any economy the national income or gross domestic product (GDP) can be used for consumption and investment. In poor countries, most of the income is used for consumption, since people are eking out a marginal existence. However, if the economy is to grow, they will have to invest through their own savings or through aid from rich countries. The government may also have to restrict consumption by taxation, which is then deployed for productive investment. Developing countries went through this process in the second half of the twentieth century, and gradually began to grow.

However, it became clear that the State was not efficient in allocating resources for productive investment, and many countries including India and China began to use the market mechanism to allocate resources. Tax rates were cut, and savings were channeled to the private sector. Restrictions on imports were also relaxed, so that consumers would

e the option of purchasing either foreign or domestic goods and  
vices.

These changes in economic policy led to a “consumer boom” with pent-up demand for a variety of consumer goods—clothing, cars, electronics, mobile phones, etc and services like the internet, financial services travel, recreation and so on. Foreign institutions have been encouraged to invest through the stock market as well as through foreign direct investment. The opening up of the economy also made it possible for Indian firms particularly in the I. T. sector to gain clients overseas. The earlier flight of engineers and I. T. professionals to the West made it easy to quickly establish collaborations in North America, Europe, Australia and the Gulf. When the I. T. work was outsourced to India clients paid the firms at international rates. However, I. T. firms could pay their workers higher wages by Indian standards, but less than their counterparts abroad, and thus make huge profits. In economics this is known as “arbitrage” of wage rates.

A new generation of Indian workers now earn wages which their parents would have earned only at retirement! Since their requirements are minimal, they are spending lavishly in malls, online shopping etc without a care in the world. As long as the demand overseas is sustained, I. T. firms continue to grow. The demand for a variety of goods and services spawned by the boom, has created space and opportunities for domestic firms as well as real estate, banking and other services. Higher education especially in the private sector is experiencing unprecedented growth –initially in Engineering and Management but now in Arts and Sciences, Law, Commerce, and other professional courses.

This new generation of consumers is not as thrifty as their parents and are spending a large portion of their income on consumption rather than savings. This pattern of behaviour is gradually moving India to a consumerist society. The reliance on bank loans, credit cards and other debt instruments is moving the younger generation towards the lifestyle of Western, particular American society. The savings rate in the U.S. has become negligible, and even the U.S. Government is running large budget and trade deficits. India, fortunately keeps its budget deficit under control and to a large extent the current account and trade deficits.

## Consequences of Consumerism

### *1. Income and Wealth Inequality*

The French economist, Thomas Piketty<sup>(1)</sup> examined cross country data over many years, and came to the conclusion that income and wealth inequality is increasing in Western countries. For many years, Western European countries in particular tried to create a welfare state where all citizens would enjoy a minimum standard of living. This was done by taxation policies which transferred income to the poor. However, as average incomes rose, those who could invest became richer at a rate faster than the average growth of the economy. The result has been rising income and wealth inequality in both Europe and the United States.

Piketty challenged the prevailing wisdom that as countries got rich, inequality would decrease due to redistributive policies. Earlier, Simon Kuznets had postulated that in the early stages of development, inequality increases but after a certain point it starts to fall. This is popularly known as the “Inverted-U Kuznets Curve”. Piketty however showed that if the return to capital is higher than the rate of growth of the economy, both income, and wealth inequality are bound to increase.

This trend of income and wealth inequality is even more pronounced in emerging economies like India and China where there is a lot of resistance to redistribution. Policies increasingly favour owners of capital who can invest and thereby put the economy on a growth path of 7-8 per cent. The rate of return on capital would have to be even higher for them to invest. The list of Indian billionaires is growing as the economy grows, resulting in more accumulation of capital in the hands of a few. Some notional redistributive measures are made to keep the lower income groups happy. However, income and wealth inequality continues to widen exacerbating social tensions between different groups.

### *2. Ecological Problems*

The consumerist life style is ecologically damaging, when people buy goods far beyond their requirements and throw away or not use

goods that they purchase. Materials and energy which are used in production of surplus goods is wasted, not to mention the waste created by a use-and-throw culture.

In his recent *Papal Encyclical* Pope Francis<sup>(2)</sup> pointed out the links between the growth paradigm, rising inequality and ecological problems. The consumerist lifestyle benefits a few at the expense of many, and ends up causing ecological problems such as pollution, resource depletion and climate change. The Encyclical strongly critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming and calls on people to take swift and unified global action<sup>(3)</sup>.

### *Financial Crisis*

The consumerist lifestyle can be sustained only through lending by banks and finance companies. U.S. banks particularly took unprecedented risks in their lending policies. During the housing boom, banks provided mortgages to house buyers who were not credit worthy—called “sub-prime mortgages”. These mortgages were packaged and sold to other lenders in U.S. and Europe. When the original buyers began to default on their mortgages, the banks and associated insurance companies collapsed and had to be bailed out by the Government. The financial crisis of 2008 affected the U.S. Economy as well as U.K. and other European economies. Since then banks have begun to meet more stringent lending norms.

The underlying cause of the financial crisis was the consumerist life style in the U.S. where households were living beyond their means by borrowing. Banks also took huge risks in their lending until the system collapsed. Indian banks are comparatively more conservative in their lending. However, many public sector banks have substantial non-performing assets (NPA) due to lending to businesses and industries, but not so much to households. There are many lessons to be learnt from the U.S. financial crisis of 2008.

Consumerism has many insidious consequences such as growing inequality leading to social tensions; ecological debt such as pollution and global warming'; and financial crises when banks begin to lend

indiscriminately to sustain the consumerist life style. The recent experiences world-wide as well as the cautionary advice in the *Papal Encyclical* need to be heeded in India to avoid the same sorts of problems.

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# **Psychosocial Correlates of Consumerism**

**Veena Easvaradoss**

The author is Associate professor and Head, Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai. Materialism refers to a conspicuous belief system that goods are a means to happiness generally or personally. It is a trait with implications for a wide spectrum of consumer behaviours. Consumerism appears to be negatively correlated with well-being. It is important to understand the psychosocial factors associated with consumerism as India has been rapidly drawn into the consumer culture in the last two decades. The paper highlights the psychosocial and sociodemographic correlates of consumerism.

## **Introduction**

Consumer culture is increasingly becoming globalised. Affluence, the material life and expensive and branded goods are in vogue. India, particularly, urban, affluent locations such as Delhi, is a prominent example (Observer Magazine, 2006).

Consumerism or materialism refers to a conspicuous belief system that goods are a means to happiness generally or personally. Consumerism has been highlighted as one of the current times 'social evils' (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2009) and is detrimental to health and well-being (Eckersley, 2011). A consistent research finding is that consumerism is negatively related to overall life satisfaction (Sirgy, 1998). In adult samples, higher levels of possessiveness, non-generosity and envy have been associated with reduced happiness and satisfaction (Belk, 1984), general affect (La Barbera and Gurhan, 1997) and emotional well-being (Kashdan and Breen, 2007). Negative relationships have also been found between consumerism and both life satisfaction

and self-esteem (Christopher et al, 2007). In addition, among young adults, those valuing financial success above other aspirations have been found to have poorer well-being, assessed both via self-report and structured psychiatric interview (Kasser & Ryan, 1993).

Materialism, as a consumption orientation has been defined by Belk (1985) as the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. Endorsing this materialistic orientation as one's values means that a person gives high importance 'to the ownership and acquisition of material goods in achieving major life goals' (Richins, 2004, p 210). At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Belk, 1985). The value measures of Richins and Dawson (1992) depict materialism as an enduring belief in the desirability of acquiring and possessing things, and as consisting of three components: acquisition centrality, the role of acquisition in happiness, and the role of possessions in defining success.

The consumer-based orientation to happiness-seeking that is commonly labelled materialism has generally been seen as a Western trait that has achieved an elevated status in industrial and post-industrial life (Leach, 1993). It is a trait with implications for a wide spectrum of consumer behaviours (Belk, 1985). Stimulated by mass media, international tourism, and multinational marketing, consumers of even the so-called Third World seem to want luxury consumer goods similar to those of the West, even before they have adequate nutrition (Wallack and Montgomery, 1991).

According to Shultz et al (1994), the proposition that the have-nots want more than the haves because they feel a keener sense of relative deprivation may explain the increase in materialism in less economically developed countries. Similarly, Inglehart's (1971, 1981) scarcity hypothesis – that value is placed on things that are in relatively short supply – leads to the expectation that greater scarcity creates stronger consumption. This desire-based prediction is paralleled in the suggestion that the work ethic is now stronger in many less affluent non-Western countries than in more affluent Western countries because desire is greater there (Furnham, 1984).

## Effects of Consumer Culture on Mental well-being

Dittmar and Kapur (2011) conducted a correlational study to examine the links between endorsement of materialistic values, buying motives, well-being and consumer behaviour in a comparative context regarding consumer culture: younger and older adults in India and the UK. The results of the study provided support for their premise that materialism has negative correlates with well-being, in terms of both life satisfaction and compulsive buying tendencies, in both countries and for both generations. The specific underlying motives for buying consumer goods appears to be the desire to project a desired identity to self and others through material goods, and the need to manage and enhance mood and emotional states. Although consumer culture penetration was lower in India – fewer bank and credit cards, less spending money and online buying – the engagement with consumer culture in terms of motives and values was at least as strong as in the UK. Generational differences were similar in both cultures with younger adults embracing consumer culture more than older adults: endorsement of materialistic values, behavioural tendencies towards overspending and over-shopping, and identity projection buying motives all stronger.

According to them, the trend of materialism to have a stronger negative link with well-being in younger adults is consistent with the notion that the powerful emphasis in current consumer culture on materialism as a path to a more satisfied and happy life has been internalised more strongly by younger people because the development of their adult identity took place when the material good life was strongly profiled within their socio-cultural environment. For older adults, their identity development took place when, comparatively, consumer culture was neither as powerful, nor as focussed on brands, expensive goods, and affluent life-styles as it is now. They point out that the most central, novel finding of this research concerns the identity projection and emotion regulation buying motives which emerged as significant mediators of the materialism-well-being link in younger and older adults in India and the UK.

Emotion regulation appears to be the underlying psychological process that links materialism with behavioural tendencies toward

over-spending and over-shopping. The greater the striving for emotion regulation through consumer goods, the greater the deregulation of the behavioural tendencies when actually buying the goods. Identity projection appears as the second underlying psychological process that explains the materialism-consumer behaviour link, as well as the process that links materialism to lower life satisfaction and even lower positive affect in younger UK adults.

People for whom identity projection is a particularly powerful buying motive 'require some other person to judge whether one is worthy of praise or reward' and focus on the presumed admiration that attends them (eg. possessions) or in the power and sense of worth that can be derived from them' (Kasser & Ryan, 1996, p 280). In fact, individuals with strong materialistic values may have aspirations that lead to poorer well-being (de Angelis, 2004). De Angelis concluded that consumer culture and its potential consequences are of increasing concern to psychologists.

### The roots of Materialism

Another line of research suggests that insecurity – both financial and emotional – lies at the heart of consumerist cravings. Kasser et al (1995) were the first to demonstrate this. Teens who reported having higher materialistic attitudes tended to be poorer and to have less nurturing mothers than those with lower materialism scores, the team found. . Research suggests that when people grow up in unfortunate social situations – where they're not treated very nicely by their parents or when they experience poverty or even threat of death, they become more materialistic as a way to adapt.

Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton (1997) found that young people whose parents were undergoing or had undergone divorce or separation were more prone to developing materialistic values later in life than those from intact homes. In the first direct experimental test of the point, Kasser and Sheldon (2000) reported that when provoked with thoughts of the most extreme uncertainty of them all – death – people reported more materialistic leanings.

Inglehart (1990) proposed that adult materialism is intertwined with formative feelings of economic insecurity, experienced during childhood and adolescence, which is related to adult materialistic tendency. Howell et al (2012) reported that materialistic individuals tend to buy material purchases over experiential purchases.

### Does more money lead to greater happiness?

In a longitudinal study (involving repeated observations of subjects over time) Nickerson et al (2003) examined two linked data sets collected 19 years apart on 12,000 people who had attended elite colleges and universities – one drawn in 1976 when they were freshmen and the other in 1995. On the average, those who had initially expressed stronger financial aspirations reported lower life satisfaction two decades later than those expressing lower monetary desires. But as the income of the higher aspiration participants rose, so did their reported life satisfaction.

Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) concluded that the unhappiest materialists are those whose materialistic and higher order values are most conflicted. They first gauged people's levels of stress, materialistic values and prosocial values in the domains of family, religion and community. Then, in an experimental study, they ascertained the degree of conflict people felt when making a decision between two value domains. According to Burroughs and Rindfleisch, the unhappiest people were those with the most conflict between high prosocial and high materialistic values. The other three groups, those low in materialism and high in prosocial values, those low in prosocial values and high in materialism, and those who are neither high nor low in both areas, reported similar but lower levels of life stress. They concluded that the key was to find a balance: to appreciate what you have, but not at the expense of the things that really matter – our family, community and spirituality.

In his book *The High Price of Materialism*, Kasser (2002) describes his and others research showing that when people organise their lives around extrinsic goals such as product acquisition, they report greater unhappiness in relationships, poorer moods and more psychological

problems. Kasser and Ryan, (1996) draw a distinction between life's goals as either intrinsic or extrinsic, and their concern is the relative importance a person places on extrinsic life goals, such as financial success, fame, and image, as compared to intrinsic life goals, including self-acceptance, affiliation, and community involvement.

The more relative importance a person places on financial success, fame, and image, the stronger his or her materialistic value orientation. (Kasser, 2002; Kasser and Kanner, 2004). Self-deterministic theory proposes that extrinsic goals are guided by external influences such as approval by others or coercion, whereas intrinsic goals are of value in their own right, bringing true fulfilment and happiness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In short, the pursuit of material goods, image, and wealth is seen as taking time and energy away from intrinsic goals, thus leading to lower well-being. Correlational studies consistently report a negative association between a materialistic value orientation and various psychological dimensions of well-being, not only in the US (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002) but also in developing countries such as Northern Cyprus (Girdner et al., 1996) and the Philippines (Dy-Liaco et al 2009).

However, Manchiraju and Sona (2014) explored the role of economic deprivation and its relationship to materialism and well-being in adulthood. They found that personality materialism was positively related to well-being measures.

### **Abraham Maslow's hierarchy as a model to explain consumerism**

It is obvious that a transformation is called for. We need to consume without being consumerists with an obsessive acquisitiveness. This difference can be explained by drawing on Abraham Maslow's (1954) model of hierarchy of human needs. At the bottom of this hierarchy are basic creature comforts; once these are sated, more satisfaction is drawn from affection, self-esteem, and finally, self-actualisation. As long as consumption is focused on satisfying basic human needs – safety, shelter, food, clothing, health care, and education – it is not consumerism. But when acquisition of goods and services is used to satisfy the higher needs, consumption turns into consumerism and consumerism becomes a social disease.

## **Impact of consumerism on children**

Children today are exposed to a growing number and range of commercial messages. These extend far beyond traditional, media advertising and involves activities such as online marketing, sponsorship and peer to peer marketing. There is some research that establishes associations between aspects of the commercial world and negative well-being among children. However, in most key areas relating to physical and mental health, there is very limited evidence of any causal relationship. Few studies have clearly established the importance of commercial factors as compared with other influences, such as parents and peers (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. 2009).

### ***Positive impact – Choice and opportunity.***

The commercial world offers children opportunities in terms of entertainment, learning, creativity and cultural experience. Discussions in this area tend to focus on the expanding range of opportunities and choices available to children as compared to earlier times as well as pointing to the long-term success of the market economy in delivering higher living standards from which children have benefited, at least in material terms (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport. 2009).

### ***Harmful impact***

The negative impact of consumerism on well-being and mental health, materialism, pester power, peer pressure, physical health, obesity, body image, sexualisation, and gender identity have been studied.

## **Impact of consumerism on adolescents**

Focussing on children and adolescents, studies have found relationships between consumerism and psychosomatic symptoms, depression, anxiety and lower self-esteem in 9 – 13 years (Schor, 2004), increased anxiety and reduced happiness and self-esteem in 10 – 18 year olds (Kasser, 2005) and reduced self-esteem in 8 – 18 year olds (Chaplin and John, 2007). Consumerism has also been related to increased self-reported emotional and behavioural problems in 11 – 19 year olds (Flouri, 2004) and to lower self-esteem and higher parent child conflict among 9 – 13 year olds (Nairn et al. 2007).

Consumerism was associated with parent-child conflict and disappointment in 8 – 12 year olds (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003), while agreement with statements such as ‘I’d be happier if I could afford to buy more things’ was negatively related to life satisfaction among Hungarian 14 – 21 year olds (Piko, 2006).

Sweeting, Hunt and Bhaskar (2012) studied consumerism and well-being in early adolescents. Well-being included self-esteem, psychological distress and anger. There was evidence of high penetration of consumerist values. There were positive associations between number of possessions and anger, and between ‘dissatisfaction’ and poorer well-being. Brand awareness was associated with positive male well-being, but negative female well-being. Only certain aspects of consumerism such as dissatisfaction, were associated with poorer adolescent well-being.

### **Consumerism and socio-economic factors**

Results with respect to age are inconsistent. Some report no difference in levels according to either age or school grade (Goldberg et al, 2003, Kasser, 2005). However, studies have variously found: a positive relationship between consumerism and age among 11 – 19 year olds (Flouri, 2004); that consumerism increased from middle childhood to early adolescence (Chaplin and John, 2007); that students in the final two years of (UK) primary schooling reported more consumerism than those in the first two years at secondary school (Nairn et al, 2007); and that high status brands become particularly important as children move into secondary school (UNICEF UK/ psos Mori 2011).

Most studies of children and adolescents reporting on gender differences in consumerism describe higher levels among males (Flouri, 2004; Kasser, 2005) although one found no gender difference (Nairn et al, 2007).

Findings with respect to socio-economic status appear more consistent. In the US studies, 18 year olds who were more consumer oriented were found to have grown up in less advantageous socio-economic circumstances (Kasser et al, 1995); 9 – 14 year olds with

the highest levels of consumerism tended to be drawn from families with lower incomes (Goldberg et al 2003) and 9 – 13 year olds from less well off families displayed higher levels of consumer involvement (Schor, 2004). Similarly in the UK, consumerism scores were higher among 14 – 16 year olds from the working class compared with middle class backgrounds (Dittmar & Pepper, 1994) and among 9 – 13 year olds from deprived compared with affluent areas (Nairn et al, 2007). It has been suggested that levels of consumerism are higher among more disadvantaged children and adolescents because they feel insecure about themselves (Isaksen & Roper, 2012).

### The way out

Mere understanding of the phenomena is, however, not enough. Consumerism needs to be supplanted by something. A shift away from consumerism and towards something else would obviously be a dramatic change for society.

There is strong evidence that when consumption is used to try to address higher needs – that is needs beyond basic creature comforts – it is ultimately futile. The kind of culture that would best serve a Maslowian hierarchy of needs is one that extols sources of human flourishing besides acquisition. The two most obvious candidates to fill this role are communitarian pursuits and transcendental ones (Etzioni, 2009).

Communitarians refer to investing time and energy in relation with the other, including family, friends and members of one's community. The term also encompasses service to the common good, such as volunteering, national service and politics. Communitarian life is not centred around altruism, but on mutuality, in the sense that deeper and thicker involvement with the other is rewarding to both the recipient and the giver. Transcendental pursuits refer to spiritual activities broadly understood, including religious, contemplative, and artistic ones. For example, transcendental pursuits have often been emphasized by bohemians, beginning artists, and others involved in life-long learning who consume modestly. However, such people make up only a small segment of the population. Clearly for a culture to buy out of

consumerism and move to satisfying higher human needs with transcendental projects, the option to participate in these pursuits must be available on a wider scale.

Communitarian activities and transcendental activities require social skills and communication skills as well as time and personal energy – but, as a rule, minimum material or financial outlay. While it is true that consumerism has turned many of these into expensive endeavours, we can break out of this mentality and find that it is possible to engage in most transcendental activities most profoundly using minimal goods and services. All this may seem abstract, even idealistic. But if we create a society that emphasizes communitarian and transcendental pursuits we are well on our way.

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# A Re-Look at the Consumer Protection Laws and the Culture of Consumerism

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The author is former Dean, Tamilnadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University. Consumer laws emerged successfully assuring quality of life and dignity to the people of India. Institutional support to realise consumer rights enables citizens to get expeditious remedy. Superior Courts have developed a system of jurisprudence guaranteeing consumer rights to flourish in this country bringing legal rights to reality in both goods and services sector. A new understanding of medical ethics, business ethics and due diligence emerged as a result of the consumer movement.

A legal culture relating to consumerism emerged in recent times. It occupied the popular minds and became an instrument for standard-setting in the day today life of the people. In the past, attributable irreparable damage to citizen's reliability on goods and services were simply ignored, and the cause of the default, damage, quality and other deficiencies were of no-man's concern. It was largely assumed that the purchaser should exercise prudent examination of the chosen product he or she propose to buy, under the classical principle of "buyer beware" or "*caveat emptor*".

In 1972 Kotler defined consumerism as the "social movement seeking to augment the rights and powers of buyers in relation to sellers."<sup>1</sup> This movement found expression in new legislations in marketing practices, bringing in, thus, a new public order. This new awareness of the public towards the government and business sent

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Kotler, as quoted in V. Sesadri, *Consumerism* (Delhi: 2006): 48.

signals for better productive standards. In the transaction of goods and services, honest advertising and marketing, product-guarantees and safeguards are integral to the fairness expected by the public.

### **The Concept of Consumer Protection**

The expression “consumerism” was first used in 1915 by Oxford English Dictionary to refer to “advocacy of the rights and interests of consumers”. Webster’s Dictionary defines it as the promotion of the consumer’s interest or alternatively “the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable”<sup>2</sup>

Consumerism was practiced from ancient period, but a new turn of consumerism dawned with Industrial Revolution. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, capitalism and Industrial Revolution focussed mainly on capital goods, infrastructure, mining, steel, oil, transport, networks, communication industrial cities, financial centres etc. Consumer goods and commercial acts of agricultural sector were not regarded as covered by consumerism. In industrial society, workers had long hours of tedious labour with poor wages, and there was hardly any time to engage themselves in the rights of consumers. Economic power was focussed on luxuries and high-end services, which had demonstrable status. However it was during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the affluent started consumerism as a culture. This culture of consumerism underwent a sea-change in 1990s.

### **Consumer Protection and International Guidelines**

At the international level, contemporary developments have led free market to flourish in the field of goods and services. This caused, at the same time, the emergence of strong awareness movements to protect the consumers from exploitation and deceit by the marketers. Thus came into the picture at the international level, the Consumers Bill of Rights in 1962. This bill recognised four important rights of consumers: a) right to safety; b) Right to be informed; c) right to choose; and d. the right to be heard. Four more rights were added to the document, which are: a) right to satisfaction of basic needs; b) right to

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<sup>2</sup> Webster’s Dictionary 14<sup>th</sup> Edition (2007):190.

redress; c) right to education; and d) right to healthy environment. The United Nations General Assembly on April 9, 1985, issued general guidelines for physical safety, protection and promotion of consumer economic rights, standards for the safety and quality of consumer goods and services, measures relating to specific areas – food, water and pharmaceuticals - and consumer education and information programmes. To these measures the UN added the promotion of sustainable consumption.

### **The Indian Scenario – Victimization of Consumers and Their Protection**

India, being a developing country, backwardness, illiteracy, ignorance and clever advertising led to exploitation. There was no sensible public scrutiny or supervision. Indians tolerated abuses by marketers, in spite of every effort taken by the Monopolistic and Restrictive Trade Practices Act (1969) and many other laws which were in force. Consumers' lack of awareness of their rights and their manipulative and dishonest ways resulted in a situation of exploitation and injustice. On the foreign trade front, there was a lot of scrutiny by the consumers abroad. They insisted on quality control which was important to suit their consumerist needs. When Indian consumer goods did not measure up to expected standards and quality, they were returned to the exporters' costs. This is also a factor that brought sharp awareness about the quality of goods and protection of the rights of consumers. The strong consumer protection movement paved the way for the passing of the Consumer Protection Act, 1986.<sup>3</sup>

The objective of this Act is “to provide for better protection of the interest of the consumers and of the establishment of quasi-judicial authorities for the settlement of consumer disputes”.<sup>4</sup> The Act sets forth the following rights: i) The right to be protected against marketing of goods and services which are hazardous to life and property; ii) The

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<sup>3</sup> For the text of the Act, see, [www.chconsumercourt.gov.in/consumerProtectionAct1986.pdf](http://www.chconsumercourt.gov.in/consumerProtectionAct1986.pdf). To improve upon this Act, a new Bill titled “Consumer Protection Bill 2015” (Bill no. 226) was introduced in the Parliament.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of object and reasons for the Act, 1986.

right to be informed about the quality, quantity, potency, purity standard and price of goods or the services as the case may be, so as to protect the consumer against unfair trade practices; iii) The right to access to variety of goods and services at competitive prices; iv) The right to be heard and be assured that consumer interest will receive due consideration at appropriate fora; v) The right to seek redress against unfair trade practices or unscrupulous exploitation of consumers; and vi) The right to consumer education.

The most significant term used in this Act is '*deficiency*' which has been defined as "any fault, imperfection, shortcoming or inadequacy in the quality, nature and manner of performance which required to be maintained by or under any law for time being in force or has been undertaken to be performed by a person in pursuance as a contract or otherwise in relation to any service". The most relevant issue is that the present era is pervaded by the services sector and so, protection of consumers from deficiency in services as being accountable under the Consumer Protection Act is highly relevant. Under consideration of deficiency in service fall banking, insurance transport, processing, supply of electrical or other energy, board or lodging or both housing construction, entertainment, amusement or the purveying of new or other information. It does not include rendering of any free service or contract of personal service. The Act provides for a simpler system of dispute resolution with quasi-judicial machinery at the District, State and the Central levels. It also provides for establishment of Councils namely, District consumer protection Councils, State Consumer Protection Councils, and the Central Consumer Protection Council. At the district level complaint can be lodged in a plain paper with a nominal court fee. From the Presiding Officer of the district level appeal shall be made to the State Redressal Commission. The final appeal shall lie before the National Consumer Dispute Redressal Commission. The procedure is relatively less formal with expeditious resolution of disputes. The guiding principles in determining the quantum of damage or compensation in most cases will be, fault, contributory negligence, act of nature or act of God etc. In most cases on consumer rights protection, courts have resorted to decide matters on the basis of absolute liability, giving up old theories of restricted liability.

The Supreme Court has laid down a bundle of rules to perfect the efficiency of the Act, exercising its power under Article 145 of the constitution. They are in brief: protection of consumers against marketing of goods and services, which are hazardous to life and property; obligation to meet immediate needs and serve long term interest of consumers; the right of the purchaser to insist on quality and quantity; and assuring of regular services. The court also gave relief where bullying and strong arm tactics were used by the banks for recovery of loans borrowed through credit cards. A case in point would be how Kerala Cooperative Society used collection agents who indulged in harassment of the clients. A number of cases reported have contributed to improving the jurisprudence on consumerism and rights of consumers. The height of a country's culture can be gauged at the level of priorities given to rights enjoyed by the consumers in goods and services provided to them and in the market segments.

### **The Case of Street-Vendors**

Though business ethics was insisted upon, it failed to produce results in favour of consumers. Perverse marketing, business tactics causing serious harm to consumers were casually taken. However, public awareness on marketing and consumer rights developed new methods for redressal. On the other hand, street-vending of all sorts of goods from pins to high end electronic goods have flourished and continue to mushroom in every part of the country. Unfortunately, they are patronised by authorities even after the Act has come to full operation. Apparently, it has had no effect on this sector of business. The poor are exposed to pedestrian shops where consumables are marketed and articles of very poor quality are sold, exposing ordinary people to danger particularly in the purchase of electrical appliances. Low cost attracts them. No quality or standardised materials are used in these articles. There is no principle or law to protect consumers from such transactions. Two points emerge clearly out of these practices. First, there are large number of people involved in this petty trade for their livelihood at the cost of lakhs of equally poor people. Second, authorities rarely take cognizance of this malady for reasons best known to them; either a new social compulsion drives them to be silent.

## **Medical Field**

Another area covered by the Act is medical negligence. Corporatized medical professionals and hospitals have become alert in their service after the Supreme Court has brought home their responsibility and accountability, as well as of the institutions attendant upon life saving processes. It has evolved pertinent norms to bring reform in the corporative culture of hospitals and their administration. Compensatory jurisprudence with absolute liability and best judgement of the physicians were also taken into consideration. The court has brought to focus the value of life in medical ethics. On its part, the Indian Medical Council views saving of life as its foremost duty. Negligence of doctors, lack of facilities, low standard of treatment, failure to maintain therapeutic and diagnostic protocols – all these issues have come under the scanner today.

## **Consumer Protection in Various Other Sectors**

We have also some serious issues of consumer rights in the field of insurance. India's foremost social security is in the insurance schemes under different plans. There are a variety of insurance covers operating in India. Contract of insurance is a contract of absolute faith. There is an affirmative commitment on the part of the insurer to pay a sum of money or money's worth on the happening of an event. At the time of insurance undertakings, an oral understanding may not stand the claim for insurance as there are difficulties to prove the terms of insurance by the consumers in these service contracts. In a case where gold ornaments were insured, it met several objections from the insurance company and compensation was denied to the owners of the property. National Commission for Consumer Protection upheld the claim of the consumer and rejected the legal interpretation of the insurance company.

When the sale of electricity was claimed as not a service, the court ruled that it indeed comes under services, under Section 2(1) (d) of Consumer Protection Act, 1986. In another case, where the bank employed a loan recovery agent, who indulged in harassment with third degree methods, the District Forum ordered Rupees four lakh as compensation. In the case of medical negligence, the National Commission and the Supreme Court have played major role bringing in a culture of medical ethics as a fundamental requirement. An instance

here, wrong treatment was meted out to a patient due to negligence and the patient died, the State Commission ordered for payment of compensation which the National Commission subsequently confirmed. Where in a coaching institute, students claimed of substandard coaching given to students contrary to the make-belief advertisements and guarantees, the consumer forum directed the institution to refund the fees collected from the students. In a case where de-addiction treatment was given to a person while under care, he was found hanging by hisangi. His wife and daughter complained against the hospital for negligence. The Commission awarded compensation. National Commission found it as negligence where a patient moved out of the ward on his own, unnoticed by nurses. In a peculiar case a lawyer was asked to refund the fee charged by him for not discharging his duties properly. In an eye camp surgery organised by Lions Club, out of 88 cataract surgery 84 failed and resulted in permanent damage to these patients. The National Commission made the organisers accountable and responsible for such gross negligence. These are a few highlights of the contribution to the consumer jurisprudence under our legal system which incorporates compensatory jurisprudence as one of its important features. This helps to keep the State and various organisations, marketers and service providers to be perpetually vigilant, and to discharge their duty responsibly and with a sense of accountability.

## Conclusion

Consumerism has become widespread in India. There is also the crucial question of protecting the consumers from unscrupulous businessmen and service providers in various segments of life. This calls for strong institutional and legal support. Some of the measures taken in the field of law and the intervention of judiciary are very encouraging, and they help to attain consumer justice. Despite being not so fool-proof Act, the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 along with subsequent amendments and Supreme Courts guidelines and recommendations has come as a protective law favouring the citizens and their rights. However, new technological advancements encountered by citizens due to cyber crimes, plastic money and failure new areas of service call for strong legislative enforcement facilities.

# **Shifting Configurations of Religious Sphere in Consumeristic Age**

**James Ponniah**

The author is an assistant professor at the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. We live in a consumerist age wherein the reigning paradigm is consumeristic culture whose dominant values such as individuality, autonomy, well-being, personal happiness etc., not only direct the consumption practices but also pervade different dimensions of modernity such as economy, entertainment, sports, food and fashion industries including religion. While demonstrating how consumeristic values and practices have influenced both the individual and the collective adherence to religion as we see in the case of popular religiosity and new age spirituality respectively, the article also draws our attention to the transformative potentials of both religion and consumeristic markets to alter each other's contemporary character.

## **Consumerism in Popular Religious Practices**

The city of Chennai, like other mega cities in India, has witnessed a phenomenal growth in religious sphere for the last three decades. Be it the Velankanni festival, Ganesh Chaturthi, Muharam, Diwali, Christmas, New Year or the religio-cultural performances in the month of Thai and Chittirai, Chennaites have religious celebrations of every kind all throughout the year. Many aspects of these religious celebrations do bear similarity to the dynamics of consumer markets. First of all, these celebrations are well marketed through advertisements in big flex boards and wall posters inviting people to participate in the celebrations. Secondly, there is no dearth of commercialisation and commodification of religious objects as evidenced in the massive-scale production of images of Ganesh or Mother Mary, the selling of ritua-

jects such as candles, flowers etc., and the innovation of new religious symbols. Thirdly, just as in market, there are multi-tiered mediators and distributors who create, manage and supply religious goods to the taste of customers, though not all of them undertake this with a religious motive.

Fourthly, just like in markets, there is a production of the new, the amorous and the mysterious in religious sphere too. The more new and glamorous a religious site produces, the more devotees it attracts. The more mysteries it generates, the more new set of practices it incites. Since popular religious domain is performance-driven, it is not fully content with a-priori categories of religious traditions. It creates and recreates its own object of worship towards which new religious practices evolve and proliferate.

Fifthly, the opposite also occurs, namely, there is a standardization of religious objects as in the consumer market. The recent erection of bronze flag poles in many Catholic churches in Chennai and in other parts of Tamilnadu is a good example. This initiative brings the churches closer to Kerala Hindu temples, thereby once again rendering Tamil Catholicism a hybridized Christianity. Sixthly, *branding*, one of the important strategies of the consumer market is also seen in the religious terrain. Popular religious shrines in India are increasingly transforming themselves into brands and create for them a robust clientele. A shrine has to claim its uniqueness and its singularity which other shrines may not offer. I am reminded of a suburban Church's inaugural mass in which the preacher claimed that this church had the true statue of St. Anthony, not the one in the city where many people frequent. Subsequently, the parish priests of that church developed it into a brand and called it a shrine of '*Kodiputhumai Kadalkarai Anthonyiar*' (Coastal shrine of St Anthony of crores of miracles). Introduction of new pieties, publication of shrine magazines, dissemination of information about miracles of the shrines through the websites etc., are all meant to create the idea of a shrine as a brand and to attract a new clientele. Like in consumer market, in the popular religious terrain too, the success of a religious brand lies in its popularity - measured in terms of number of devotees it attracts and the financial gains it fetches.

## Exploring Different Views on Relationship between Consumerism and Religion

Popular religious phenomenon as described above makes us wonder if religion too, like consumer market, operates on the logic and rationality of demand and supply. At this juncture one may also recall Rational Choice Theory which holds that the religious activity (i.e., the demand) will increase where there is abundant supply of religious choices offered by a wide range of ‘religious firms’ and it will diminish where such supplies are limited. This theory makes religion into a marketable product. But if we look at today’s consumer markets, the opposite is also true. In making and selling their products in consumer market, the companies seek to transform themselves into a ‘cult brand’. In the process they acquire religious overtones. As Douglas Atkin in his bestselling book *The Culting of Brands*,<sup>1</sup> observes that the brand construction amounts to creating religious cults. Just like the Mormon Church, Unification Church and other religious groups, the well-reputed US companies like Apple, Ebay, Mary Kay, Saturn, Harley-Davidson are also making themselves into a cult in the sense that they aim at building communities around them. To that end, brands like religious groups create their own distinctive ideology, belief-systems, stories, characters, and unique philosophy. Subsequently, just as a stable group starts to form around them, both - religion and market - offer their customers a membership to a community of shared values and interests. Both claim to give unique and self-fulfilling personal identity, and both inspire and elicit uncommon loyalty. A cult brand attracts certain customers for a variety of reasons and rewards them in a variety of new ways. Just as in the case of religion, a group of customers too exhibit a great devotion and dedication for a brand. Brands enjoy exclusive devotion from its members who often become voluntary advocates of the brand. Thus, in our consumeristic age brands are made into symbols. They are framed within a spiritual/symbolic economy in which a product to be purchased is not merely sold as an economic product. Even before purchasing,

<sup>1</sup> Atkin, Douglas, *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

the consumer finds himself or herself in a world of shared experiences and socially nurtured meanings.

Further, consumption and identity are so intricately knit together today. An important aspect of this type of identity production is that it must be displayed in order to be recognised by others. Brand identity has to be performed to obtain social recognition. It means that the expression of one's identity requires the presence of others to grant recognition. A brand has to be authenticated by others. This propels consumer society to become a performing society. It means 'to consume is to perform' and 'to be a consumer is to be consumed.' In acquiring the status of a branded consumer, the consumer herself has to become a product of public consumption. This has not only affected the epistemological character of our contemporary world but has also altered the social character of traditional societies. Consumerism has driven the traditional societies to become ostentatious. That is what we see happening in contemporary India today. It is well reflected in varieties of regional TV shows and in the way people conduct themselves in the public places with ostentatious dress patterns and stylised life-ways.

Consumeristic epistemology has affected religion as well. Two examples evidence this trend in religion too. The adherents of different religious traditions and sects increasingly make their religious identity conspicuous and recognizable by others through symbols and insignia such as medallions, rosaries, scapulars, amulets etc., These religious signs and symbols which were until recently seen as matters of personal conviction have become today objects of public consumption. The things of the sacred realm, devoid of its religious signification, are displayed in the domain of the profane as a fashion brand. Secondly, the grand pageant in which the religious processions and rituals are carried out, performed, displayed in public places, and broadcast through ever-shrinking religion TV channels show that consumeristic mode of branding and identity making has also impacted religious sphere as well. Thus religion in consumeristic age has come to be reinstated in the public domain. It means then that consumeristic epistemology is so to be regarded another significant factor that forces the re-scripting of secularisation thesis. Religion is no more receding into private sphere. Consumeristic age is drawing religion to the public domain.

## Management Paradigm, Consumerism and Religion

In the context of relationship between consumerism and religion we also need to pay attention to an important historical development in academic disciplines, namely, the emergence of ‘Management Studies’. The academic field of Management Studies born in 1970’s has impacted both the consumer market and religion. We know that ‘management’ lies at the crux of the economy, politics and polity, society, and culture. In this context, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello<sup>3</sup> have argued that management acts as today’s ‘spirit of capitalism i.e. it functions ‘as the justification, foundation, and legitimisation of this capitalist order by sustaining and promoting modes of action and dispositions that are coherent with its logic.’<sup>4</sup> In other words, it has come to take the place of Weber’s protestant ethics in the second phase of capitalism i.e. financial and consumer capitalism inaugurated by the globalisation of the economy in 1980’s. While globalisation of economy favours mobility, delocalisation, outsourcing of human skills and de-territorialisation of technical capabilities, it adopted management mode to achieve its goal. Even as they aimed at efficiency, growth, ever-increasing productivity and profitability, management framework sought to realise them by mobilising individual-related positive values and equating success with self-realisation.

Management outlook, even while reinforcing an economic perspective of human life, celebrates the idea of the individual as ‘human capital’ whose – economic – potential needs to be tapped and individual goals to be realised. To this end, management framework promote an array of values in tune with neoliberal/consumer capitalism such as self-realisation, enrichment, liberty, autonomy, flexibility, mobility, adaptability, utility, self-fulfilment (measured in terms of instant

<sup>2</sup> François Gauthier, Linda Woodhead and Tuomas Martikainen, “Introduction: Consumerism as the Ethos of Consumer Society,” in François Gauthier and Tuomas Martikainen (eds.), *Religion in Consumer Society: Brand Consumers and Markets* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 19.

<sup>3</sup> As referred in Gauthier Linda, Woodhead and Tuomas Martikainen (eds.), *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

enjoyment and self-comfort), positivity, desire for progress, creativity, confidence, commitment, communication, competitiveness, self-sufficiency and self-reliance.

The influence of management on religious organisations are too obvious to ignore. After the 1980s, the established churches adopted more managerial structures and procedures. It also caught the imagination of the new pentecostal and charismatic churches, 'which promote a prosperity-oriented theology and the very same values that are carried by management.'<sup>5</sup> Thus on the one hand, we see religious institutions, both the established and the new ones, conform to a managerial logic. But on the other, there is an explosion of 'alternative spiritualities' which reject both traditional and bureaucratic modes of authority in the Weberian sense but projects the individual as a producer of the 'authentic.' In the later, the site of management is no more an organisation but an individual. Such a highly subjectivised form of religion serves as a counterweight and alternative to the larger organised forms of religion. The influence of consumer capitalism on religion is also to be seen in the manner in which today's religious functions and processions are performed with such a grandeur. The way they are meticulously planned, choreographed, rehearsed, managed, performed and at times telecasted with a such a professional perfection - so much so it makes one wonder if there is any difference between a religious event and a public event like an award ceremony.

### **Consumerism, Primacy of Subjectivity and Homogenisation of Religion**

In the process of evaluating the objects of consumption, the consumeristic age has come to alter the very contours of the valuation criteria which are less and less derived from the tradition one hails from. Consumerism has brought the subjective self and its experiences to the centre stage. The subjective experience which consumerism espouses has profoundly undermined the authority mechanisms of institutionalised religions<sup>6</sup> in the sense that it subjects their competency

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 21

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Ibid., 15

over truth to the scrutiny of the individual's experience. While consumerisitic process of self-making shifts the very configuration of religion from being a domain of 'obedience and a compliance to pre-existing schemes'<sup>7</sup> to one of 'personal choice and individual commitment,' it situates religion and faith within the context of immanent eschatology of the individuals, i.e., eschatology of their self-realisation. The outcome is not a situation of chaos and fragmentation. On the contrary, Danièle Hervieu-Léger argue that this 'movement towards individualisation is accompanied by a certain homogenisation of religion.'<sup>8</sup> Though the beliefs and its contents may continue to be the same, they are disconnected from its original set of inscribed meanings and are 'reintegrated in the new globalised networks of consumer culture in which expressive individualism and associated sociality thrives.'<sup>9</sup> Taken to its logical conclusion, it implies that there is no longer a deep cultural difference between a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim and a Hindu. For some authors it means that "the turnaround is complete since the times analysed by Max Weber: it is no longer the different Christian cultures that shape capitalism – it is consumer culture that shapes Christianity (and religion in general)."<sup>10</sup>

A definite pointer to homogenisation is the fast-spreading universalistic idea that all religions lead to the same goal, though each one of them is different from the other. Interestingly, some of the concerns of this newly crafted homogenous religious landscape like wellbeing, new life, true love etc., have also become hot topics to the world of consumeristic culture.

For Danièle Hervieu-Léger,<sup>11</sup> these new set of possibilities in the present religious landscape is a result of a development that took place in the emergence of consumer and neoliberal societies. Just as the

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> As cited in Gauthier Linda, Woodhead and Tuomas Martikainen (eds.) *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See, Danièle Hervieu-Léger 'Quelques paradoxes de la modernité religieuse: Crise de l'universel, planétarisation culturelle et renforcements communautaires,' *Futuribles*, 260 (2001): 99–109.

markets were deregulated in the phase of neo-liberalisation, so also 'symbolic goods' have been liberated from the hands of traditional, institutional monopolies, creating a standardising effect.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, many religions have entered the consumer markets. Mara Einstein's book *Brands of Faith* describes how marketing and management techniques are applied within religious organisations, sparking significant changes. She notes that different religious organisations invest now in names and logos in order to be recognisable in an ever more crowded marketplace.<sup>13</sup> Just like consumer markets, religious organisations pursue their expansion agenda very aggressively. The advertisements of various religious congregations for religious vocations in various magazines and journals serve as a good example. The advertisements of various new age religious organisations like Amma, Nirmandamayi, Adiparasakti etc., through their websites, magazines and TV channels also demonstrate their interests to exploit the domain consumer market for the promotion of their message and mission. However, in the same process, a conflictual situation is experienced between faith brands between disseminating their message to the wider adherents and faithfully preserving their authenticity. The fall-out is subtle to draw one's attention. The complexity of religion gets lost as branding signifies the singling out of a very small number of defining characteristics.<sup>14</sup>

### **Religious Commodification, Resistance and Market Competition**

In addition to competitions between religious organisations, the deregulated nature of consumeristic markets also offer new areas of confrontations not only between markets and religion, but also between different competing companies some of which use religious reasonings to break the monopoly of certain market empires.

To illustrate the first point, namely, the conflict between market and religion, some examples would suffice. For instance, in 1997 the famous

see, Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

Gauthier Linda, Woodhead and Tuomas Martikainen, *ibid.*, 17.

Nike shoes company placed a logo of flames on its running shoe resembling the Arabic word for God, Allah. Offended by this form of sacrilege, Muslims all over the world announced a global Nike boycott. Nike then was pressured to withdraw the product. In fact Nike was forced to apologise with the following words: 'Through this process [they have] developed a deeper understanding of Islamic concern and Islamic issues and ... have opened up a broader dialogue with members of the Islamic community'<sup>15</sup> Similarly, advertisement of ghd, an UK based hair product company read as 'ghd, a new religion for hair.' To promote a new ghd IV hair styling equipment, it featured an advertisement in which a woman clad in lingerie was depicted with a rosary in her hand sitting at the edge of a bed and praying. Soon her prayer was shown to be heard when running text across the screen read 'ghd IV thy will be done,' wherein the letter 't' was made to resemble the Christian cross. Just like Muslims and Christians, the Hindu community also objected to the commercialisation of the Hindu symbols. Though the use of Hindu Gods like Ganesh, Lakshmi etc., in advertisements is very common in India, when the images of Hindu deities were used in the West rather distastefully on merchandise like flip-flops by Lacey's Footwear bearing images of Ganesh or on the bikinis by Italian designer Roberto Cavalli displaying the image of Lakshmi or on the toilet seats with the images of Kali and Ganesh on the cakes by Oxford Company Selfridges, the Hindu organisation considered them as blasphemous and accused the businesses of trying 'to gain a quick buck in the name of the beauty of Hindu culture.'<sup>16</sup>

In marketing consumer goods, religious ideas are also appropriate to break the monopoly of certain market empires. For instance, French businessman Tawfiq Mathlouthi floated a new brand of soft drink called Mecca-Cola in 2005. His motive was to compete with Coca-Cola and Pepsi and to provide consumers an alternative to American

<sup>15</sup> Sharmina Mawani and Anjoom Mukadam "Religious Commodification and Resistance" in Lyn Thomas (ed.), *Religion, Consumerism and Sustainability: Paradise Lost?* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 61.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 63.

ods. While donating 10% of the profits to Palestinian charities and 1% to European NGOs, Mathlouthi claimed that in 'launching a humanitarian business, Coca-Cola is not the first, we are the first.' One of his advertisements read 'No more drinking stupid, drink with commitment' and claimed that his products have incorporated Islamic values,<sup>17</sup> which appealed to the Muslim sentiments. Similarly, another British company, Qibla Cola (Qibla denoting the direction for prayer towards Kaba) also claimed to base their business on Islamic principles. 1 per cent of profits was dedicated to charities locally and to the Third World. Its advertisements read as: 'Coke, Pepsi, both sell an American dream. We want to sell an Islamic dream.'<sup>18</sup> The company's reason was that one who drinks Coca-Cola contributes to the brotherhood of man while Qibla Cola works towards a united Muslim brotherhood.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, to compete with the Mars Company, the Ummah Caramel chocolate bar was launched in May 2004 by UK-based Ummah Foods and it claimed to produce a true *halal* chocolate bar.<sup>20</sup> Even when these companies made tall assertions that those who consume their products are adhering to Islamic views, their hidden agenda was very clear. They appropriated religious ideas and ideals to compete in business and to capture new clienteles whom they hoped to win over on religious grounds.

### **Exploring Common Grounds between New Age Spirituality and Consumerism**

New Age movements/spiritualities are fast growing new phenomena in a consumeristic age. They have come to challenge not only the authority of traditional religions, but also their control over people's lives. New Age spirituality is commonly regarded as an individual phenomenon and as a 'personal quest for meaning.' What underlies this quest is an insidious privatisation of religion, both in terms of subjectivity and commodification, which embodies – perhaps even makes a virtue of –

Cf. Ibid., 64-65.

Ibid., 66.

Cf. ibid.

Cf. ibid., 66-67.

- the very individualism and consumerism<sup>21</sup> - which the teaching traditional religions - as found in Bible, Quran, Dhamma and Gita would disapprove of. This privatisation has a historical trajectory. can be traced back not only to nineteenth-century liberal protestant tradition of Schleiermacher but further to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Carrette and King speak of second privatisation of religion' in the latter half of the twentieth century 'which has resulted in the erection of altars to individualism and consumerism in pursuance of 'the self.'<sup>23</sup> New Age spirituality is consonance with one of the characteristics of modern consumerist society namely "subjective turn" - 'a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences.'<sup>24</sup>

In the context of new age religions, individual's spirituality is no longer beholden to a particular religious tradition or an organised religion. Rather, it is drawn upon 'bricolage' of disparate elements from various traditions to suit one's psychological dispositions, mental temperament, religious tastes and ethical preferences. A smart consumer today invests time and energy to access different 'reviews' of the product before the purchase and opts for a product that enjoys a high rating of 4.0 plus for the product, the seller and the reviewer. Similarly, the spiritual seeker also weighs different spiritual paths which are accessible to him/her and verifies their credibility through such methods as 'background check', enquiring into the authenticity of the key religious leaders and their adherents. Just like a consumer who picks and chooses from various brands to suite the occasion and taste, the spiritual followers too, tend to draw from various religious sources, and customise them-

<sup>21</sup> Nicholas Buxton, "Not Exactly a Selling Point? Religion and Reality TV" in Lyn Thomas (ed.), *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Carrette, and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Heelas, and Woodhead, Linda with Seel, Benjamin, Szerszynski, Bronislaw and Tusting, Karin, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford and Carlton, Blackwell, 2005), 2.

spiritual menu. They craft a menu that would contribute to and enhance their well-being. Just like a market consumer, they opt for different spiritual menus for different occasions. One may do *zen* mediation in the morning, *vipasana* in the office during working hours and *yoga* at night to get good sleep. Further, just like a consumer feels comfortable in breaking the distinction between the private and public consumption in a liberal society, so too spiritual seekers exercise their freedom to pursue their 'spiritual consumption' in public. The increase in the volume of people doing *yoga*, *vipasana* and other spiritual exercise in the open at Chennai's beaches and parks proves this point. Further, just like a consumer discards a product that does not suit him/her and switches from one product to another, so too spiritual seekers tend to avorse though different spiritual paths in course of their life time. Such path-exploring processes are considered not only normal and necessary but legitimate in one's spiritual journey.

Not all encounters in the spiritual market takes place in a situation over which the subjects have total control. More often than not, the individual subjects approach the spiritual market when they are at crisis point in their lives. Finding themselves inadequate and vulnerable, unable to cope with the demands of modern life, yet pressured to do better, they deliver themselves into the hands of agents who act as expert guides (a preacher or an evangelist just like a car dealer or a mortgage consultant!) who offer to the battered individual a recipe to become a perfect individual.

However, new age spirituality cannot be explained merely in terms of marketing/ commodification of spiritual paths. Though new age spirituality may make use of the techniques of marketing to attract the spiritual consumers, even at times with profit motive, the end result can be guaranteed, not by money power as in the case of commercial markets, but by spiritual power which one has to constantly work for oneself. Secondly, the spiritual paths remain distinctively different from others. In fact, they earn their credibility only in as much as they can deliver on their promises, namely, to make the individuals more strengthened, equanimous and altruistic.

# **Consumerism – A Play of Signs?**

**Felix Wilfred**

The author is Director of Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, Chennai. In this contribution he tries to analyze the phenomenon of consumerism mainly from the perspective of their symbolic value and indeed, as a play of signs. This is in line with the philosophical and cultural movement of late capitalism wherein there is a shift from production to consumption, and more basically a collapse of reality and representation. The author is of the view that traditional ethical systems may not be the best response to consumerism. Rather one needs to latch on to ecological movements which place human beings in a larger and more integral framework of reality; draw resources from plurality of cultures against standardization of happiness; and fashion the self through new and centrifugal practices.

Some time ago, at a conference in Europe on the theme of life after death, one of the speakers lamented that close to 30% of Europeans believe in reincarnation. He wanted to lay the blame squarely on the influence of “Oriental religions” – meaning Hinduism and Buddhism. But then I intervened to remind the speaker that there may be other reasons for this belief. In the Indian tradition, release from rebirth is considered as attainment of heaven (*moksha*), and people pray to escape from the cycle of births - *samsara*. Why do the Westerners welcome reincarnation? It could be simply because the enticing goodies and cosy comforts the modern world offers are such that one life is too short to enjoy them all; one would like to be reborn again and again to be a perpetual consumer! That is when one could think of being closer to heaven. I am reminded of a saying, “heaven is for those who cannot find anything good on earth”. Consumers find everything so good, that heaven becomes redundant.

Consumerism has spread like wildfire to every part of the world, even in poor countries. During my visits to Manila in the Philippines, I have been struck by the Sunday masses celebrated at shopping malls with large crowds of people, ready to go on their shopping spree at the same spot immediately after the religious service. The sacred temple is located within the dream-world of most fashionable goods in a country that is battling against endemic poverty and deprivation of millions of basic needs of life. Consumerism has permeated every department of life, and none of them is free of its influence.

The phenomenon of consumerism needs closer analysis. What I intend to do in this short contribution is to highlight certain facets of consumerism which have gained little attention in the past. The second part of the article is devoted to discuss the kind of response consumerism calls for. The idea is not to introduce a set of moral principles and norms, nor propose glib cures. Resuscitating traditional moral values may sound like ethical babblings and may fall on deaf ears, given the general resistance to imposed morality. Alternatively, we could respond reflecting on the sustainability of the consumerist way of life – ecologically and socially - broaching on the issue of environment, justice, equality etc. I have done this elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In the present contribution, I would rather focus on the premises and dynamics at work in consumerism (Part I), and try to move beyond moralizing to look for alternative humanizing conceptions, worldviews and practices that could come to terms with consumerism more adequately, (Part II).

### **Part I**

#### **The Premises and the Dynamics of Consumerism**

##### **A New Conception of Time**

Generally, discussions have centered around two models of time – linear and cyclical. But the phenomenon of consumerism would not fit into either of these conceptions. Underlying consumerism is a view of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia. Struggles for a Different Society*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005). See chapter 11: “Consumerism in a Society of Negations. The Anatomy of a Phenomenon and Its Ethical Implication”, pp. 279-306.

time in which the past and future meet in the present. The present, hence, is not a flow from the past, much less the result of the past. The past and the present are not in a causal relationship. The present is rather the pregnant moment of possibilities which needs to be lived in full. Ideas of progress, development, moving towards future do not chime with consumerism. Rather than continuity between the past and the present, there is disruption, discontinuity. The present is a moment of surprise and excitement where the unpredictable happens rather than something that happens as a result of previous deliberation and planning. In classical approach, the present has been viewed as precious opportunity to prepare for the hoped for future with dreams and promises. In consumerism, the future cannot claim the sacrifice of the present, very different from the traditional mindset of the masses of people in India. People built their future by renouncing to the present, postponing or delaying gratification to a future moment. Consumerism has, thus, effected an erosion in this traditional conception of time and the building of future.

### **Representation as the Reality**

To be able to grasp consumerism more fully, we need to reflect on the way reality and representation are interrelated. In general epistemological thought, reality precedes representation, and truth itself is seen as the correspondence between representation or cognitive process and reality. In the post structural world-view underlying consumerism, reality and representation are differently inter-related. Representation is the realm of concepts, signs, symbols etc. These signifiers are thought to refer to something besides themselves to some signified. Post-structuralism has abolished the distinction between the signifier and the signified. We do not have any more signs or signifiers referring to something outside of them. All what we have are signifiers (empty signs) which are inter-related among themselves in a system of codes and symbols.<sup>2</sup> "Signs owe their capacity for signification not

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John Sturrock, *Structuralism* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), especially pp. 136-176; see also Steven Connor, ed., *Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cam-

to the world but to their difference from each other in the network of signs that is the signifying system".<sup>3</sup> There is an overlap of reality with representation and the former ceases to exist. This is very crucial to be able to understand and interpret consumerism.<sup>4</sup> In consumerism, what is important is not simply the use value, but the sign value. There is little difference in a consumer good in terms of its use value. For example, when we say that car is meant for transportation, this use value is equal for everybody. But the coded sign value of a car makes a lot of difference, according to its type and price. In the consume society, what we have is the play of signs.<sup>5</sup> Communication takes place through the play of signs. As Baudrillard notes,

The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society *communicates* and converses. Such is the structure of consumption, its language,

bridge University Press, 2004); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 1997); Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, tr., David B. Allison, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Childs, *Modernism: The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000); (special Indian edition 2013): 71.

<sup>4</sup> If we analyze the phenomenon of consumerism through modern linguistics and semiotics, we will be able to understand its working. While the traditional linguistics concentrated on the genealogy of words and grammar (diachronic approach), modern linguistics has tried to follow a synchronic approach which ties together language with the world and society. The world is not simply represented by language, rather language becomes that through which we have access to the world, and it is truer to say that language constructs our world, than language represents the world. To put it differently, given the fact that we are in a play of symbols, in consumerism we do not look for use value, as we are not to look for meaning in language, but simply its form or its value as signifier in an infinite network of self-differentiating signs.

<sup>5</sup> This aspect is so important that I have highlighted this in the title itself of this article.

by comparison with which individual needs and pleasures are merely speech effects.<sup>6</sup>

Signs as words in language have their meaning in relation to other words, signs. The difference a sign makes in this way could become endless and infinite. This explains why there can be no saturation for consumerism as signs of difference, distinction are endless.<sup>7</sup>

To this collapse of reality and representation which is the only thing that matters, we must add the fact that in the underlying philosophy of consumerism, there is no more such Kantian duality as *phenomenon* and *noumenon*. There is one single reality that is the *appearance*. Consumerism is in service of appearance and it seeks to embellish it. Put it concretely, consumerism is about packaging, but strangely that is all what we have; it is not that there is anything inside the wrapper! This resonates with what I noted regarding consumerism as a play of signs; play of wrappers. If a value is measured on the basis of the extent one is ready to sacrifice other values for it, then, appearance could be said as the supreme value, and that is why commodities in their sign value is so very important to people. One's consumer practice becomes symbolic capital, manifesting his/her honour, prestige and influence. Particularly when people practice hyper-visible consumerism or *conspicuous consumption*<sup>8</sup> with so much extravaganza as to be observed in the high class Indian weddings, parties of the corporates etc., they enter into the imaginary feudal world, its pomp and pageantry,

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998): 79-80; see also ID. *Simulations* tr., Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext, 1983); see also Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, tr., Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 2002)

<sup>7</sup> For a highly readable narrative and analysis of consumerism, see Oliver James, *Affluenza* (London: Vermilion, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> The expression was used for the first time by Thorstein Veblen in 19<sup>th</sup> century. See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899); New edition (1994).

which all add to their symbolic capital. For example, a recent wedding of a Kerala NRI billionaire – Ravi Pillai - held in Kollam cost 25 crores with many unmistakable signs of opulence. Imagine, the tent for wedding was spread out to 4.25 lakh square feet to accommodate 40,000 guests!<sup>19</sup>

### **From Use and Exchange Value to Sign-Value**

From a global perspective what marks off the present age from the times of industrialization is the shift *from production to consumption*. At that age, the centre of attention was the productive forces, means of production and the workers as agents of production. However, at this present age of late capitalism and with the advent of postmodernism, the attention is focused on consumption and all that has to do with it. In the context of a new approach to commodities, the Marxist distinction of use value and exchange value has undergone a transformation. In the present-day culture of consumerism, what seems to dominate is the *sign value* of commodity, almost eclipsing the other two values.

To illustrate what is symbolic value, let me refer to the use of mitre and crosier by the bishops in the Christian Churches. A bishop uses mitre not to protect himself from rain and sun; nor does he use the scepter as a walking stick (unless the bishop continues to grow so old that he needs one!). No, these have symbolic value, and not use value or exchange value. The wearing of mitre and carrying of scepter symbolize power and authority, and these as distinguishing symbols mark them off from the rest of the clergy and the faithful. To change the image, a car, as we noted, is a means of transportation, which is its use value, but whether a person uses a Nano, Indica, Mercedes, Audi or BMW makes a lot of difference in terms of the symbolic value they have. We could make easily a hierarchy of cars and the coded value they represent in terms of status and social identity and recognition.

The problem with Marxist analysis of commodity is that it leaves out the dimension of sign and symbolic value, and consequently fails to

<sup>19</sup> See *Outlook*, (December 14, 2015), 70-71.

understand commodity as *communication*, especially when commodities are exchanged for their sign-value in society. These signs seem to have a life of their own and the whole society seems to function in terms of these exchanges of signs which also represent a hierarchy of distinctions. To illustrate with an ordinary example, clothes serve to cover nakedness and protect us from the environment – cold and hot. In cold regions, people tend to wear thick and tight dresses and in hot climates the dress becomes thin and loose. But, wearing dress does not stop there. To clothes are added a sign or symbolic value. When a person uses branded clothes or latest fashion designs, he or she communicates something very important; it shows the person's social and economic standing, and serves as a mark of distinction, difference. Fashion is a language.<sup>10</sup> The signs of this language are exhibited in public for social recognition and distinct identity. Consumer goods are not a source to fulfill needs, but a means, a field that is in service of social distinctions.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2005); see also Susan Sontag, ed., *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 1993); Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> This dynamics in consumerism explains also the creation of waste. It is but a logical sequence to consumerism. Things are not made to last as in former times, but only to be discarded and replaced by something new and different. This is the result of “hurried life”, and more importantly because of the sign value of objects, things are to be discarded, independent of their use value, so that with new consumer goods, the sign value and symbolic capital are heightened further to a new level. This is indeed a “planned obsolescence” manipulated by the market and the media. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); ID., *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008). For an anthropological view of consumption, see Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990)

## The Self as Commodity

The self is not a pre-existent reality, but something configured constantly and moulded by our freedom and choices.<sup>12</sup> Looking for a hidden self is as real as searching to find something inside the onion. Exercise of freedom creates various layers of the self. Viewed this way, the consumer activity people engage in and their choices make them what they are. To put it in simple terms, “Tell me what you buy, I will tell you who you are”.

Individuation and functional specialization are two important features of modernity. Analyzing consumerism from this perspective, we could observe how consumer goods help the process of individuation, namely the creation of a unique profile of the self and self-identity. Consumerism at the same time exhibits ambivalence. On the one hand, the object of consumption plays a symbolic role, and helps to construct an identity of the self in differentiation. On the other hand, the “self” also gets lost. The subject with his or her agency also now becomes an object like other objects. The system of signs of which the consumer society is constructed, transforms the subject into a commodity. The commodification of the self as a presentable good leads to various strategies for self-promotion. The transformation of the self as appealing leads people to all kinds of measures that enhance the body. The modern systems from entertainment to education are based on commodification of the self. Whether one applies for an academic position, or seeks one's fortune with film industry, the system forces a person to turn himself/herself into a commodity for others. Social media helps as an important means for self-commodification.

There is an obsessive make over culture with expansion of beauty parlours, increasing sales of cosmetics, cosmetic surgeries, fashion shows, weight loss recipes etc – all on the increase worldwide and

Cf. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, second edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), especially the interview with M. Foucault, 252 ff (Foucault's interpretative analytic of Ethics).

also in India. As the *Economist* reports, “worldwide, the cosmetics market (including cleansers and skin creams as well as make-up) grew by 3.6% to € 181 billion (\$ 240 billion) in 2014; it is expected to double over the next 10-15 years”.<sup>13</sup> The body is so much part of the self that it needs to be continuously remade and remodeled in the consumerist culture, so that it turns out to be culturally and socially valuable. This culture is promoted by movies, TV programmes, advertisements, fashion magazines and by projection of celebrities of the entertainment field. Driven by all these factors, there is a general craving to appear young and look good to which consumerism responds with endless goods and services. Much of the self-esteem depends today on these factors of appearance and looks. This is especially in the case of women in the patriarchal society where they are made to be perpetually in beauty contest. As it is, frantic quest to edit the body, so to say, has to do with their success in life.

### **Commodification of Human Relationships**

One of the worst consequences of consumerism is in the field of human relationships. Human relationships are recast in the mould of market operating with its logic of supply and demand. Conversion of human relationships in the image of the market empties them of their depth and trivializes their beauty. In the consumer society, human bonds, including marriage, are for the time being. Any permanent commitment and loyalty are eschewed. I am reminded of an anecdote about the famous British actress Elizabeth Taylor who, when married for the eighth time, told her new husband, “Darling, this is also for a brief time!” The speed with which commodities are acquired, then dumped as obsolescent only to be replaced by new ones become also the new commodity-grammar, so to say, that determine human bonds.

### **Consumerism – Reinforcement of Casteism**

At the global level, consumerism has functioned as a leveler in one sense. For, the goods and services which were once the privilege of

<sup>13</sup> *The Economist* (December 5-11, 2015): 61.

well-to-do and those on the upper echelons of the society are accessible to large masses of people today. In a society of scarcity, wearing silk was a mark of distinction and sign of belonging to nobility. Today, the consumer goods and services are available across the spectrum of various traditional social classes. Yes, consumerism has contributed to eliminate to a large extent class distinctions. Could we do this of caste distinctions? Instead of being a leveler, consumerism seems to have become a new vehicle to reinforce the traditional distinctions and differences. In the Indian tradition, the caste structure is maintained by clear demarcation of symbols and rituals. No one would dare to arrogate the symbols or symbolic roles of the higher castes. Duly elected Dalit panchayat presidents cannot sit peacefully on his or her chair, for it is seen as a provocation by the upper castes as usurpation of their symbol of local power.<sup>14</sup> To prevent this, upper castes use many tactics of control and play proxy politics.

As we saw, consumerism is a matter of status, acceptance and exhibition of power. When it is practiced in a traditional society which is organized around caste-structure, it acquires a further significance and new contours. If caste is like the proverbial cat that has nine lives, consumerism in Indian society is a dazzling reincarnation of caste and a glorification of hierarchy and social standing. Due to new forces, some aspects of caste may get weakened and even get threatened; but consumerism serves to reinforce it. The consumer power overlaps with caste-position. Thanks to the social and cultural capital, the upper castes also are the ones at the higher end of the consumer society. Those at the bottom of the casteist society, poor and struggling for their basic survival needs, are simply out of the consumer hierarchy; they do not count, and are the outcastes of the consumer society. In this connection we may recall here that in recent times there was a big controversy on dietary consumption - eating cow-meat - and

<sup>14</sup> See a report on this situation in *The Hindu* (February 25, 2010). See also S. Chaudhary, *Dalit and Tribal Leadership in Panchayats* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 2004)

unfortunately not a few incidents of violence based on this issue, as for example, the lynching of a Muslim in Dadri a few months ago.<sup>15</sup>

There is more to it than what meets the eye. The issue of meat consumption is ultimately about ritual purity and pollution. Those who consume meat are the polluted ones and the vegetarians are the pure and the unpolluted. There is also a hierarchy here – those who eat other meats are less polluted whereas those who eat cow meat are the untouchables and most polluted. There is a myth created by the upper castes that the majority of Indians are vegetarians. It is a farce. According to a reliable survey, only 31% of Indians are vegetarians and has to do mostly with upper castes. When it comes to Southern states, surprisingly, the percentage is much lower – as low as 2% in Kerala; 4% in (old) Andhra Pradesh, 8% in Tamilnadu; 8% in Orissa; 8% and 3% in Bengal.<sup>16</sup> What does this mean? The majority of Indians are consumers of meat, and in not few instances, meat-eating is a necessity for survival. Without meat millions of poor will suffer famine. What is attempted today is to impose the dietary habits of the higher castes on the rest of the society, showing again the underlying caste chemistry in the issue of food-consumption. Under the influence of globalization, consumerism in the area of food is getting increasingly diversified with wide variety of choices, especially in the cities. All yet the caste-based purity pollution continues. Meat-eating is looked down upon and vegetarian purism is extolled. The *sastras* have laid down a whole system of dietary and culinary practices and laws governing food consumption. I had a colleague in the University of Madras who was so strict with dietary regulations and purity of food that for fear of being polluted, he would cook for himself whenever he was forced to travel. No wonder his trips were very short!

<sup>15</sup> See *Frontline* (Hindutva's Holy Terror), (October 30, 2015)

<sup>16</sup> See *The Hindu-CNN-IBN* survey, the results of which was published in *The Hindu* August 14, 2006. India is the largest exporter of beef in the world.

## Part II

### Responding to Consumerism

There have been many critical voices – both in the East and in the West – on consumerism and consumer way of life. Most common critiques spring from an opposition of the material and the spiritual and the otherworldly, and this is to be observed frequently in the response religions. This orientation was represented in the Christian tradition by the Puritans and Quakers of the past, and by many fundamentalist religious groups of present times. But in most cases, critique derives from ethical considerations which view and judge consumerism in terms of *good* and *evil*, and try to give ethical prescriptions against consumerism. Further, in the 1960's there was a scathing critique of mass society and industrialization, and generally against the establishment.<sup>17</sup> It took the form of a counter-culture movement, which meant resisting and protesting by unconventional means, as could be seen in the "hippie" and "beatle" subculture of that era. It found expression in arts, in music, film, attitude to sex, etc. This kind of counter-cultural movement has become a spent force. Other critiques are voiced from the perspective of economy, common good, justice, social equity and the environment.

### Ecological Movements and a New Vision

One of the most significant and fast spreading critique of consumerism stems from the ecological movements. It was Protagoras, the Greek sophist, who said that human being is the measure (*metron*) of all things. The anthropocentrism which developed in the West through

The theoretical perspectives for this counterculture movement were provided by thinkers of the Frankfurt School of critical theory represented by Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and others who advocated a critical appropriation of modernity, especially after the horrendous experiences of World War II. See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); see also Bernstein, ed., *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991): 85-92.

the period of Renaissance, Enlightenment and industrialization to lat capitalism of today is firmly rooted in the centrality of the humans who continue to exploit nature and its resources. The ecological crisis arises for example, the dangers posed by the warming of the earth has brought about the realization that there are "limits to growth".<sup>18</sup> It is a clear message that the present form of consumer life is a course that will eventually bring about destruction of humanity and nature. Environmental movements are the ones today strongly critical of consumerism and its impact. They call for restraint on profligate and luxuriant way of life. The recently concluded ecological summit in Paris is all about containment and restraint so as to ensure a happy life for all human beings and ensure a sustainable future for planet earth.

I think if the critique on consumerism were to be based only on the fear of survival, it may not turn out to be effective. There is much less chance of succeeding unless the critique is based on a different vision of reality and inspired by new convictions leading to alternative practices. If there is the recognition that nature is also part of our self and being, then there is the possibility of restraint on the use of nature and more basically a view of nature as a value in itself.<sup>20</sup> The ecological movement needs to be also strengthened by a way of life that is characterized by self-restraint or control, and indeed construction of the self in new terms. We shall consider some of these aspects in the following pages.

<sup>18</sup> Already in early 1970's a study by the Club of Rome under the title of "Limits to Growth" forewarned about the consequences of unbridled development course at the cost of nature and environment.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *The Economist* (December 5 – 11, 2015): 73 ff. For a special report on climate change, see *The Economist* (November 28 – December 4, 2015)

<sup>20</sup> This comes out very clearly in the encyclical *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis. See Felix Wilfred, "Theological Significance of *Laudato Si*. An Asian Reading" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, vol. 79 (September 2015): 645-661.

## Cultural Resources

What we need today is to explore the cultural resources that could help challenge the increasing forms of consumerist way of life. This proposal is premised on the fact that there is an inextricable bond between human development and culture. Culture is not simply a means for development. A better and happy life for individuals and community is not only a matter of economic growth but also a matter of culture.<sup>21</sup> In consumerism, there is a standardization of happiness linked to instant gratification. We need to recognize the fact that there is a plurality of conceptions on what is happiness. It is often bound up with culture, geography and environment. Among many people, happiness is in community, in sharing with others and being in solidarity. This we find, for example, in many tribal societies.<sup>22</sup> Their culture based on such values tend to foster nature and its flourishing as it is important for their life and sustenance as a community. Challenging consumerism means to foreground many indigenous cultural forms and ways of life that are supportive of human solidarity and sustainability of the environment. With the planetary crisis today affecting deeply humanity and nature, a plurality of ways of life springing from cultures promises hope to get out of this murky situation. The traditional Indian culture in harmony with nature is epitomized in the frugal way of life pursued by Gandhi.

Gandhi's entire life functioned much like an ecosystem. This is one life in which every minute act, emotion, or thought was not without its place: the brevity of Gandhi's enormous writings, his small meals of nuts and fruits, his morning ablutions and everyday bodily practices, his periodic observances of silence, his morning walks, his cultivation of the small as much as of the big, his

See the forthcoming work of John Clammer of the United Nations University, Tokyo, titled: *Cultures of Sustainability: Social and cultural Transitions to Sustainable Future*.

See John A. Grim, ed., *Indigenous Traditions and Ecology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001)

abhorrence of waste, his resort to fasting – all these point to the manner in which the symphony was orchestrated.<sup>23</sup>

Moral policing as being done by the fundamentalist forces in the name of culture is not really the proper response to consumerism. Self-restraint way of life that is respectful of nature as reflected in the life of Gandhi would be the kind of response required in the face of increasing consumerism in the country.

### The Illusory Self and Perpetual Unhappiness

It is in the very logic of consumerism and in the interest of its own survival that people are kept unhappy. Strange though it may sound, this is how consumerism functions. Satisfied consumption is an oxymoron. Perpetual dissatisfaction with what is, and aspiration toward what could be is that which moves the consumer. To put it differently, consumerism thrives on perpetual unhappiness, and on the discontentment of the consumer whom it goads with promises of new commodities. The absence of consumer aspiration will spell stagnation of economy. The fulfillment of needs and desires do not end with certain commodities and services. There is the thirst to look for something more satisfying, something that is in keeping with the new trends, which will ensure that one is not left behind. Further, the anxiety to keep up with the Joneses, and the sense of insecurity of being excluded, or left behind function as the motor that propels new desires and new commodities endlessly with no saturation point. To be able to understand this phenomenon, we need to be aware of a paradigm shift consumerism represents. In earlier times the decisions and choices were based on the consideration whether something was *allowed* or *not allowed*. The freedom consumerism has brought about resists such binary which seems to constrain the freedom of the consumer with an external normativity. Consumerism has replaced this traditional

<sup>23</sup> Vinay Lal “Too Deep for Deep Ecology: Gandhi and the Ecological Vision of Life”, in Christopher Key Chapple & Mary Evelyn Trucker, eds., *Hinduism and Ecology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000): 206.

ary, with a new one, namely, namely what is *possible* and what is *possible*. There is the drive and ambition to be successful and explore what is possible without restraint, and when one is faced with something possible, frustration sets in. How do we respond to this?

### **e Self in Its Humanizing Potentials**

The recent floods that ravaged the city of Chennai exhibited two extremes of the human – its capacity for the loftiest and the noblest, and also its inclination to evil, deceit and perversity. People risked their lives to save others from inundated homes and from roof tops, and they carried succor to those desperately needed it. On the other hand, there were people who looted houses and pilfered relief materials and sold them for a gain. Given these two polar pulls in the human, it is important to create an environment where the positive and outreaching properties of the human flourish and bear fruit. But the point is that the present market driven consumerism is creating an atmosphere which makes people centripetal and egoistic, concerned about the fulfillment of their needs and desires.

The needs of others and the rhythm of nature call for another model of economy and development, which will bring out the humanizing potential in the hearts and minds of people and also will blend harmoniously with nature and planet earth. Let me elaborate the point further. Morality and ethics are not a matter of principles and norms. There is something like a pre-reflexive morality which is spontaneous and not premeditated and planned. The times of crisis are when we see this morality in operation. I find the best illustration of the pre-reflexive morality in the analogy of the Chinese sage Mencius.<sup>24</sup> He speaks of a child which is on the verge of falling into the well. Someone catches the child and saves it. And this person did not think neither of the gratitude of the parents nor of the praise of the community for his action. There is some prompting from within that the child should not

die which impels the person to reach out and save it. Consumerism allows little room for such spontaneous practices. For, in our consumer world, every commodity has a price; so too every service. The consideration of reward and gain for oneself inhibits people from involving themselves for the wellbeing of others and of the community. It is enough to reflect how some important areas of life like health care and education were pre-eminently fields of service. These fields evoked the feeling of service and solidarity, and money was never the major consideration. Think how the whole scenario has changed under consumerism. Health care and education have been transformed into commodities or consumer goods. As a result, there are star hospitals and premier educational institutions available to wealthy consumers. The state itself has been infected by the consumer environment and does not consider that it is obliged to provide public health service and general education. Conveniently it leaves these important service sectors to private providers who turn them into fields of plunder and exploitation.

### **Consumerism as *Artha* and *Kama*?**

Does critique of consumerism mean negation of and alienation from the material base of life? That does not seem to be the case in the Indian classical tradition, which does speak of the materiality of the world and affirms it. In *artha* we have the pursuit of wealth and in *kama* the sensual pleasure. These are precisely what is at work in consumerism. Now, neither *artha* nor *kama* are objects of condemnation; rather they are integral parts of life in fullness. *Kāma* was the core of the philosophy of tantra. *Kama* also found place in the art of sacred temples as in the world renowned erotic sculptures of Khajuraho temple in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>25</sup> Hence, neither *artha* nor *kama* are to be spurned or suppressed through a normative or negative ethics of rejection and avoidance. Rather, the Indic tradition has insisted

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Desai Devangana, *Khajuraho: Monumental Legacy Series* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); Shobita Punja, *Khajuraho: The First Thousand Years* (Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000)

relentlessly that the pursuit of pleasure need to be self-regulated and directed to higher ends. Otherwise a person will become like a rudderless ship. They need to be guided by *dharma* which again is not a set of rules and norms. Dharma is a matter of practices which form, shape and mould the self; it is a path on which we need to walk.<sup>26</sup> Without dharma guiding *artha* and *kama*, they could easily become destructive forces.

Whereas karmic action with its desire for fruits and consequences produce bondage, *nishkama karma* (actions without desire for their fruits and consequences) lead to *moksha* – supreme bliss and happiness without end. Consumerism is a process of unfulfilled happiness; it is an endless cycle. Like Sisyphus of the Greek myth, one imagines to climb to the top of the hill with all the bursting energy of one's desires, but the moment it appears the peak of happiness is reached, in no time one is brought down to the abyss of unhappiness. *Nishkama karma* brings two results: it pushes us towards the realm of bliss and happiness. It makes the path towards the other in a genuine engagement without expectations. *Nishkama karma* is often viewed as Indian experience of the Kantian categorical imperative. But in reality with *nishkama karma*, the accent is not on *duty* (as in the case of categorical imperative) but on the *non-attachment* to the fruits of action.

## The Dialectics of Expansion and Contraction

As we noted, the right ordering of cosmos, human societies and the self is paradigmatically represented by the concept of *dharma*. It is not a static order, but more a dynamic process in which at the cosmic level there is the expansion (modern big bang theory) and contraction,

<sup>26</sup> See Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, vol. I (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1983); Sushil Mittal & Gene Thursby, eds., *The Hindu World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); Jan Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens I* (Stuttgart Berlin: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 1978); see also Rajendra Prasad, ed., *A Historical Developmental Study of Classical Indian Philosophy of Morals* vol. XII. 2 (New Delhi: PHISPC, Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2009)

and at the level of the human, there is the dialectic between engagement (*pravrittidharma*) and withdrawal (*nivrittidharma*). If consumerism represents the expansion and engagement with senses and the world of *artha* and *kama*, these are really what they are through a dialectic of negation and withdrawal or renunciation. Engagement and renunciation are two spheres of dharma to be practiced at every stage of life. The contraction or withdrawal is not imposed or coercive, but integral part of the fashioning of the self. Mastery of the self is an important component of dharma. A happy life, as experience demonstrates, is not through practices of consumerism, which, as we noted, leaves people unfulfilled and in perpetual unhappiness. This is not to say that one should not seek to fulfill one's needs and desires. The point is that a good life happens when the self is moulded and transformed through dharma and guided by it both in engagement and in renunciation. At this level, dharma is truly the path to *moksha* - which is both liberation from bondage and ultimate happiness.

### Bondage – Freedom and Consumerism

Senses are indispensable parts of human self, and the pleasures of senses are legitimate and lawful. Any morality or ethics that advocates suppression of senses will look at consumerism from an outdated moralist perspective. What is really advocated in Christian, Hindu and Buddhist spiritual traditions is a check on the excesses in the fulfillment of the desires of the senses. Central to Buddhism, for example, is the middle path (*madhyama-pratipada*) – so central that it has become an alternative name for Buddhism.<sup>27</sup> Middle path is that which avoids extremes both sides and confers greatest richness to human existence and flourishing, and frees it from suffering, because of the balance and equilibrium it represents.<sup>28</sup> Balance and harmony are something

<sup>27</sup> According to a Jataka tale, Gautama Buddha, given to extreme ascetic practices for Enlightenment under the pippala tree, did not refuse milk-rice from the maiden Sujata (later to become his first lay disciple), to satisfy his hunger.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Takeuchi Yoshinori, ed. et al. *Buddhist Spirituality* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1995)

important for sustaining of all reality, including the human and the environmental. The Christian advocacy of temperance is not a negation of senses. It only makes sure that the pleasures of senses do not end up harming the self, the other, the community and nature. The absence of middle path and temperance in consumerism can make it a bondage. This enslavement and bondage are to be shunned.<sup>29</sup>

### **Practices of Self-fashioning**

We noted how consumer practices go to configure the ego, the self and its identity. It is a continuous process. But as history and experience show, there are practices of a different kind which shape the ego but in a different way. In India and in many civilizations of the world, there have been practices which were advocated for self-mastery, control, restraint etc. Examples of ascetic tradition disciplining the body and mind in India are well known to us. The Indian practices for mindfulness and single-mindedness (*ekagrata*) are springboards for enlightenment. Among the ancient Greeks, we could refer to the stoics, and to Plato himself who illustrated the fashioning of the self with the allegory of the chariot – a classic in the Western tradition. He imparted the necessity of the mastery of the self amidst divergent pulls, represented by two types of horses harnessed to a chariot.<sup>30</sup>

Buddhism would see in the craving (*trishna*) for consumer goods and clinging to them a fallacy of an illusory self, a bondage from which a person needs to be liberated. The way for right kind of self-fashioning is to follow the Eightfold Path to Enlightenment.<sup>31</sup> The mastery of the self is to be distinguished from world-denying ascetic practices which

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Richard K. Payne, ed., *How Much is Enough? Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment* (Somerville MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010)

<sup>30</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus* (Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, LLC., 2007)

<sup>31</sup> Allan Hunt Badiner, *Mindfulness in the Marketplace: Compassionate Responses to Consumerism* (California, Berkeley, Parallax Press, 2002); Stephanie Kaza, *Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume* (Boston: Shambhala Publications 2005)

are to be found in all world religions. The former does not oppose materiality but helps to navigate through it without being drowned. The practice of temperance in Christian tradition would resonate with practices for self-control and mastery.

Self-restraint is not a virtue of the ascetics; it is something essential for the growth of the individual, and communities, and humanity at large. In fact, for Sigmund Freud, deterrence and sublimation underlie the birth of civilizations. Freud said that without social cohesion and without limits to the freedom of individuals, there can be no civilization.<sup>32</sup> It is built on the principle of restraint. Now, this restraint can be heteronomous when it comes from out, or autonomous, when it is self-generated. The desire, thirst for consumption driven by market forces need to be counterbalanced by the principles of deterrence and moderation for the sake of common good. This regulation has also a therapeutic effect on the self.

### **Consumerism, the Realm of Gift and Non-Instrumental Reason**

Consumerism is a centripetal movement. What is sought is the self, its needs, fulfillment of its desires, identity, social standing etc. This centripetal movement requires to be balanced by a *centrifugal movement*. The category of “gift” can enlighten us on this point.<sup>33</sup> Gift is a movement towards the other, including the nature. Gift is where an exchange takes place. In some practices of wedding, as it happens in several parts of Tamilnadu, what is given as gift – money or articles - is recorded carefully and even announced publicly. The recording is important because the family which received the gift needs to reciprocate in the same measure at a future wedding function in the family of the donor. But this is no real gift; it is rather a commerce – *do ut des* (I give you so that you may give back).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization an Its Discontents* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), (German original in 1930).

<sup>33</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000)

Gifts could be given for various reasons – out of fear, for ostentation or to affirm one's social status like the donation of kings in the past, or to gain a favour as in the case of bribes. Real gift (*dana*) is when no reciprocity and no calculations are involved. Pure gift takes place when it is a sign of sharing of oneself and a sign of love, esteem and recognition of the other. Any real gift is an end in itself and not in view of something else. Indian tradition presents King Sibi, Karna, Vikramaditya and Harischandra as icons of generosity who gave to the extent of great personal sacrifice without expecting anything in return. That reminds us of the words of Jesus, “do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Mt 6:3). The practice of non-reciprocal gift can transform men and women from the realm of obsessive and neurotic consumerism for satisfaction, comfort and status and lead them to the realm of ends. It is a humanizing act. Giving is not a means but an end like the offering of the widow in the temple, whom Jesus praises. “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all the living she had” (Lk 21: 3-4).

Consumerism is simply on another trajectory. It functions with the logic of instrumental reason, namely the human subject is driven by the goal its actions and choices bring about. It is the same pattern at work in human relationships. The other becomes a commodity with a price, the object of one's desires for the ends the subject determines for itself. It is very evident in the case of women. Patriarchal mindset and attitude see women as a commodity, as an object for use, and not a person with dignity and rights who cannot be instrumentalized for one's ends. But there are realms which defy this logic of instrumentality with which consumerism is vested. Experience of gift-giving, friendship, art, etc., opens up a new horizon of non-instrumentality. Their ultimate purpose is enjoyment. These represent a realm where realities are ends in themselves. Relating oneself to these realms of ends transforms the self and liberates it. Here is at work a centrifugal movement.

Recognition and cultivation of this non-instrumental approach to life could be of great power in bringing about a necessary balance and equilibrium. I see ethics as the art of combining harmoniously and

judiciously the instrumental and the non-instrumental in life. The non-instrumental reality is first and foremost represented by human persons who are an end in themselves and never to be viewed or treated as means. The non-instrumental realities represented by gift, friendship, art, etc., could bring about certain fashioning of the self. In the experience of friendship, gift and art there is a non-reciprocity. If they were to be reciprocated, they could easily fall into instrumental rationality, and utilitarian calculus. The movement from consumer to donor, from a self-seeking individual to a caring person is radically a humanizing process which makes ethical injunctions and normativity redundant.

### Conclusion

Though the present contribution discusses many issues concerning consumerism, I chose deliberately "sign" as the central concept – *Consumerism as play of signs*. For, it is a concept which helps us analyze the phenomenon of consumerism more sharply. Unfortunately, this sign aspect has been generally neglected or marginalized. What is at stake is sign or symbolic value with which every commodity is inscribed. With the play of signs goes the illusory world and alienation of the consumerist world.

What I have tried to argue is that traditional ethics based on good and evil, virtue and vice, duty and rights, ends and means – all these may not come to terms with the world of expanding consumerism. Nor is it a matter of replacing one ethics with a different ethics. Rather, we need to rely on the substantial critique to consumerism which the ecological movements have brought in. They call for an alternative economy and way of life, and reflect a different vision of the self, the humans and nature. These three realities are interwoven. Ethics is implied here as the path we take to bring harmony and balance into these realities, rather than a system of principles.

The continuous stream of consumption leaves in the consciousness of individuals and the community layers of sediments which form a new cultural bedrock of values, attitudes, modes of behavior etc. The sediments of a new globalized subculture - consumer way of life -

needs to come in encounter with an alternative visions, values and practices which will be transforming the self and the environment. Moving ahead towards these goals could be assisted by the plurality of cultural resources of peoples, which have been neglected and set aside in the march of a standardized pattern of life, needs and desires.

The perpetual unhappiness consumerism creates could be encountered by constructing a new identity of the self and by a way of life that is restrained, balanced and in harmony with nature and the environment. These resources are amply provided both in the Eastern and Western traditions. Many practices are associated with control and mastery of the self – a self that is not bent on itself (*homo curvatus in se*) but in a movement of outreach towards others and the wellbeing of nature. Such centrifugal movement could be sustained further by non-instrumental engagement such as offering of non-reciprocal gift, fostering of genuine friendship and cultivation of art. They represent in today's world a true spiritual and mystical approach – indeed a "mysticism of open eyes" – which is not the preserve of religions, but is open to anyone who is seriously engaged for the transformation of the self, the world and committed to the sustainability of planet earth.

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